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DRAGON

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"My God, It's Full of Stars . . ."

Here we go with my first-ever *Dragon* editorial. (In case you haven't been keeping up with current events, you'll want to read last month's *Dragon* and *Dungeon* editorials.)

I expect that everyone would like to read about the sweeping changes we'll be making to the magazines—out with the old, corrupt regime and in with the new voice of the people!

I'm here to state that no one is being backed against a wall at dawn with a blindfold and a cigarette. Yes, there will be changes, but no, there won't be any sweeping, flushing, or dumping.

For the immediate future, things will go on about as they have in the immediate past. *Dragon* Magazine has established a strong format and reputation for providing solid Dungeons & Dragons support colored with interesting flavor and story, along with entertaining and illuminating columns and the occasional piece of short fiction such as this month's *Dark Sun* tale, "Blood Oasis" by Kevin Anderson.

At the same time, the magazine follows the game's lead, and the Dungeons & Dragons game and worlds are always in some degree of flux. The big changes looming on our horizon are the upcoming launch of Dungeons & Dragons *Essentials*™ with the release of the Red Box in September. Bill Slavicsek and Mike Mearls have a lot to say about that in their Ampersand and Design & Development columns; you'll see more than the usual number of words from those two in the next few months.

Other than that, I can share *my vision* of what makes a particular magazine article strong or weak vis-à-vis our beloved game.

First, I'm all about story. As much as I love a well-tuned power or feat, it's the spin on the gears that really makes things hum. We intend to put a lot of emphasis on story elements that will fire your imagination and expand your D&D perspectives. Even if a particular article is about a class or race you seldom play, we'd like you to find it compelling reading because of what it says about the astonishing worlds where your characters operate.

Second, I'm all about the *fantastical*. I love that word—*fantastical*. It's so evocative. The merely "fantastic" seems ordinary compared to the *fantastical*. The word begs for italics. The great attraction and power of Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying is that it transports players not just to times and places that never existed but to times and places that *could not* exist outside the players' imaginations. The more you stretch the imagination, the closer you come to the fantastical. That's what we're reaching for.

As always, we'd like to know what you think. There's never enough time in the day to comb the blogs as thoroughly as we'd like or respond to all the forum posts that provoke our thoughts, but you can send them here directly at dndinsider@wizards.com.

Origin Stories

Strong characters make strong entrances.

By Steve Townshend
Illustration by Empty Room Studios, Guido Kuip

Origin stories prime new characters to step onto the campaign stage fully drawn, with motivation, purpose, and direction. At their most basic, origin stories provide alternative backgrounds for player characters. Played to their fullest, they can drive a character's story, bestow themed rewards, and shape the superstructure of the campaign.

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Each origin below begins with a motivating conflict for a player character and suggests a general arc for how the character's story might develop over time. Characters who pursue the goals and conflicts inherent in their origin stories reap the mechanical rewards and story benefits for doing so.

Cooperative Storytelling

When a player chooses an origin story—be it one of the examples in this article or a written summary of the character's background—that choice can say a lot about the kind of story the player envisions for the character.

For Players

Outside the game, you should discuss your character's origin story with the DM. In game, you should react to player characters, nonplayer characters, and events in *any* adventure through the filter of your character's origin story. This can give you a running start to defining your character as a living, breathing entity. Although your character story might not always be in the spotlight, playing your origin through every scene of the story keeps that story active. This kind of Roleplaying 101 not only solidifies your character in the group's imagination, but it serves as a constant reminder to the DM to further your origin story and dole out its rewards.

For Dungeon Masters

The arcs of origin stories might have as much or as little focus in a campaign as the group desires. In short, think of origin stories as character-oriented side quests that can run parallel to the plot, intersecting it and diverging from it when appropriate.

If you're at a loss for character side quests, try reflavoring a villain in a module to match one of the player character's enemies and switch out treasure with the player character's appropriate alternative reward. If you're running a homebrew campaign, try incorporating the player character's archenemy into the ranks of your main campaign adversaries or their associates.

For more on cooperative storytelling, see chapter 1 of *Dungeon Master's Guide 2*.

Archetypes

The archetypes are typical conflicts inherent in a heroic character's background. Standard fantasy archetypes can include heroes on the run (Frodo Baggins), heroes in exile (Drizzt Do'Urden), heroes that sacrifice everything for power or ambition (Dr. Faustus), heroes orphaned by evil (Harry Potter), and heroes bound to a destiny (Roland Deschain). Two such archetypes are included here, but these examples provide a template to develop new origins for your own campaigns.

Origin

Origins are specific character backgrounds for each archetype that contain an inherent conflict and a villain. Each archetype might contain as many origins as you can dream up. In this article, two origins are presented for each archetype.

Paragon and Epic Development

At the paragon tier, the story's stakes increase and the hero gains new insights into the nature of his or her problem. Oftentimes, what began as a personal conflict for the hero escalates to a problem that threatens the hero's companions or the entire land. At the epic tier the stakes rise again, threatening the world and everything the hero has hoped to achieve, forcing a final confrontation with an aspect of his or her origin.

The suggestions below are necessarily general, and players and DMs should tweak or alter them to suit the campaign.

Boons

Origins conclude with alternative rewards for characters who pursue and develop their origin stories. As with the other alternative rewards in *Dungeon Masters Guide 2* (page 136), the DM assigns these boons to characters in place of treasure.

Archetype: On the Run

You have a price on your head, because you have earned the enmity of powerful enemies that will stop at nothing to capture you dead or alive. You have no safe places to hide and few whom you can trust without fear of betrayal. Friends are a luxury you can hardly afford, because your mere presence endangers their lives. You do not stay in one place for long and you have learned to sleep lightly, with a weapon close at hand. One day you will face your hunters and make a final stand. Until then, you must run.

Origin: The Basilisk Society

You fled when you learned the hidden purpose behind Basilisk, the secret society to which you belonged. Basilisk swore to bring down tyranny and place rulership justly in the hands of the people. But their secret leader, an ash nymph known as the Golden Mistress, runs a criminal cartel to bring about the downfall of civilization so that it can be reclaimed by nature. She will not let you escape because she gave you her blessing—her true kiss of trust. You know too much, and now you must be reclaimed or silenced. In cities, she hunts you with assassins and thugs; in nature, she hounds you with wild beasts and fey.

Associated Skills: Nature, Streetwise

Paragon Level

You might have eluded the Mistress's bounty hunters in the dim benighted alleyways and desolate windswept crossroads. You might have outwitted her eladrin, dryads, and elves. The Mistress underestimated the considerable talents of your companions. Yet this has done nothing to impede her agenda.

In civilized lands, entire cities turn into anarchic battlegrounds for gang warfare and revolution as Basilisk's promise of freedom gains broad appeal. In the wild all is silent and still, a deep breath that precedes the terrible roar of a horrific beast.

With her plans so close to fulfillment, the Mistress will brook no interference, and you are a loose end that must be tied up. She sets the Wild Hunt upon you. Displacer beasts, fir nymph archers upon wild wolves, briar witch dryads, quicklings, and firbolgs sound their horns and seek your head.

Epic Level

You have nowhere left to run. You must face the Mistress, a confrontation she greatly anticipates. Whether your continued escape has roused her ire or whether you have disrupted her ultimate plans, the pursuit must come to an end. Basilisk prepares to unveil itself and turn the world into a stony wilderness of dead cities, and the Mistress's fey army prepares to claim it. The world is doomed, because only one that has received her true kiss can defeat her. She would be willing to offer this one much, even marriage and rulership by her side among the Court of Stars.

Boon

True Kiss of the Mistress Level 3+

The Golden Mistress gave you her true kiss of trust, imparting wards of protection against enemies that would harm you. Little did she know that your enemies were soon to be her own minions.

Lvl 3	680 gp	Lvl 18	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	2,125,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Property: Gain a +2 item bonus to saving throws against effects that immobilize, restrain, slow, and stun.

Power (Daily ✦ Charm): Free Action. *Trigger:* You take damage from an attack and the attacker has combat advantage against you. *Effect:* The attacker is dazed until the end of its next turn, and you can shift 1 square.

Level 8: The attacker is dazed until the end of its next turn, and you can shift 3 squares.

Level 13: The attacker is dazed until the end of its next turn, and you can shift 5 squares.

Level 18: The attacker is dazed until the end of its next turn, and you can teleport 5 squares.

Level 23: The attacker is dazed until the end of its next turn, and you can teleport 10 squares.

Level 28: The attacker is dazed until the end of its next turn, and you can teleport 15 squares.

Origin: The High One Falls

In a prophetic vision, the high priest of your people saw you slay the ruler of your land. Your possible future act against the person, who many believe descended from the gods, caused you to be branded a traitor. So you fled your home, narrowly escaping capture and execution. Now mercenaries and bounty hunters stalk you wherever you go with cunning traps and ambushes, each desperate to claim the royal price on your head or to protect the sovereign from harm. Did you love or hate this ruler? Was the priest's prophecy likely to come true, or were you framed? Will the path you take help to avoid this destiny or cause it to come true?

Associated Skills: Endurance, Intimidate

Paragon Level

You have foiled traps in temples and taverns, and your companions have suffered ambush and death for their loyalty. Now the kingly reward on your head tempts even your own relatives to consider your worth. On every shore, dark tales are told of your deeds. Your enemies have made you into a monster—a rich prize everyone hopes to capture. Humanoids of every race come for you on rocs, on nightmares, and on guulvorgs—sometimes on wyverns or the backs of dragons.

At the same time, the ruler's enemies—usurpers, malcontents, and exiles—see you as a potential pawn in their bid for power. Their advances only make the prophecy seem that much more plausible.

When the hour of your sovereign's prophesied demise draws near, someone makes an attempt on this ruler's life—someone who looks, acts, and thinks exactly like you.

Examples of Heroes on the Run

Films, TV shows, and books have featured many characters that can inspire you when you create your fugitive character.

- In *Star Wars,* Han Solo was on the run from the gangster Jabba the Hutt.
- In *Lost,* Kate was a fugitive from justice wanted for the murder of her father.
- In *Farscape,* John Crichton fled the Peacekeepers, who wanted his brain for the wormhole technology secreted within it.
- In *Battlestar Galactica,* the last remnants of humanity fled the robotic cylons that sought their extermination.
- In the Lord of the Rings, Frodo Baggins fled the forces of Sauron in his quest to destroy the One ring.

Epic Level

Whether or not your sovereign perished, your reputation as a villain and blackguard has spread far and wide. The king's most powerful allies seek vengeance, among them knightly champions, deva, angels, and the furious god that was your sovereign's progenitor.

But as the drama plays itself out, one angel secretly gloats. This entity cunningly orchestrated a chain of events that began with a simple prophetic vision which included a cunning deception that fooled even a god. It will end only when you are forced to strike down its god—a being that bears a remarkable resemblance to its offspring.

With the god this angel thoroughly deceived out of the way, the angel will inherit the whole of its astral realm.

Boon

Kingslayer's Curse **Level 3+**

Your name and reputation are feared wherever you go. You embrace this reputation, embody it, and make use of the terror it inspires.

Legendary Boon

Unconquerable Lvl 3 680 gp
Property: Gain a +2 item bonus to Intimidate and Perception checks.
Power (Daily ✦ Healing): Immediate Reaction. *Trigger:* You are knocked prone from an attack. *Effect:* You can stand up from prone and spend a healing surge.

Outlaw's Fortitude Lvl 8 3,400 gp
Property: When you run, you take only a -2 penalty to attack rolls.
Power (Encounter): Minor Action. Gain a +2 power bonus to Fortitude until the end of your next turn.

Fearsome Reputation Lvl 13 17,000 gp
Property: Gain a +5 bonus to Intimidate checks against hostile and unfriendly targets.
Power (Encounter ✦ Fear): Minor Action. Push an enemy that is adjacent to you 1 square.

Rage of the Persecuted Lvl 18 85,000 gp
Property: When you escape from a grab, you can shift 1 additional square.
Power (Daily): Minor Action. Until the end of the encounter, gain a +1 item bonus to damage rolls for every 5 full points of your Intimidate skill check bonus.

Face Me, Cowards Lvl 23 425,000 gp
Property: Creatures that attack you from melee reach take a -2 penalty to the attack roll.

God Hunter Lvl 28 2,125,000 gp
Property: Enemies within 5 squares of you cannot benefit from healing effects.
Power (Daily ✦ Fear, Healing): Free Action. *Trigger:* You take damage from a critical hit. *Effect:* You can spend a healing surge, plus you mark the attacker until the attacker is marked by another character.

Archetype: The Price of Ambition

You paid a heavy price for the astonishing power you possess. Although your friends and family were content to walk familiar paths toward mundane dreams, your ambitions burned far brighter and required sacrifices that only you had the courage to make. It might have been for love, for personal power, for justice, or for revenge that you risked everything, but you reached for power beyond your grasp and damned the consequences.

If only you had known how much you stood to lose. Tragedy follows in your wake like a ravenous dire wolf, devouring all you hold dear. When you made your choice for power, you lost a part of your soul.

But will the ends ultimately justify the means? If your power fulfills its purpose, can even one such as you achieve redemption?

Origin: The Demon Binder

When a minor demon possessed your true love's body, you did not have the heart to strike the killing blow. Instead you offered the creature a choice: It could bind itself to your service, or else you would strike your love down and send the demon back to the Abyss.

The creature accepted your offer, but it kept your love's soul as a hostage, secreting it away in the Abyss.

The foul thing is bound to you now and cannot be abjured. It wishes only to wreak havoc in the world and rise among the ranks of its kind by lending its awful might to your causes. It is an obedient servant and a prison mate. It is a festering growth. It is the jailor of your true love's soul.

Associated Skills: Arcana, Religion

Paragon Level

The demon's power grows with your own. It does not matter who strikes the killing blow—the demon thrives on the violence that surrounds you. Where once it was an insubstantial spirit, now it manifests in horrendous physical forms from the bits and pieces of the beings whose souls it has consumed, assembled in random order. Sometimes it wears your former lover's face or body.

Examples of the Price of Ambition

Various authors have created characters who have paid a high price for the power that they possess.

- In the Elric Saga, Prince Elric wielded the soul-drinking sword Stormbringer to stop his cousin's villainy, but the sword had a particular taste for the souls of those dearest to Elric.
- In *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* both doctors chose to tamper with science to disastrous ends.
- Dr. Faustus chose to make a deal with the devil for knowledge and paid the ultimate price.
- In *A Wizard of Earthsea,* the wizard Ged dabbled with powerful magic and released a shadow that hunted him across the world.
- In *Dragonlance Chronicles*, the wizard Raistlin took the test of High Sorcery early, inheriting great power but ruining his body.
- In *The Lord of the Rings*, Smeagol strangled his brother Deagol for the One Ring and then became corrupted by its power.

But with power, the demon has become confident and reckless. It gloats about the relative power of former adversaries in its native Abyss, and in encounters with certain demons and immortals it fights more furiously. Some of these creatures recognize your demon and scorn it for the lowly thing it once was. You can align the puzzle pieces that the demon and its enemies reveal to you to construct a picture of your demon's origin, the prison of your true love's soul, and the key to the demon's power.

Epic Level

From its origins among the mindless hordes of dretches in the Abyss, your demon has risen to significant power. Along the way it has used you and tormented you, but after so much time together, to lose it would be like severing your own hand.

The demon offers you a choice. If you help it usurp the lord of its native abyssal layer and become a demon lord in its own right, it will unbind you and free one soul you hold dear. Otherwise, it will complete your demonic apotheosis, merging with you forever to become a powerful entity but a creature eternally in conflict with itself.

Have you pieced together the clues to sever the source of the demon's power yourself? Will you cooperate with your demonic ally, or destroy it? Have your choices bound you to this fate for eternity? After so much bloodshed, can your soul or that of your loved one be saved?

Boon

Demonbound **Level 3+**

The demon is bound to you as you are bound to it. And as you grow in power, so too does the demon.

Lvl 3	680 gp	Lvl 18	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	2,125,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Property: You can summon your demon using the summoning rules presented in *Players Handbook 2* (page 221).

Power (Daily ✦ Summoning): Minor Action. You summon a Medium demon in an unoccupied square within 10 squares of you. The demon has a fly speed of 6 (hover). It has a +2 bonus to AC and a +2 bonus to Fortitude. You can give the demon the following special commands.

✦ **Standard Action:** Melee 1 (targets one creature); your highest ability +4 (6 at 11th level and 8 at 21st level) vs. AC; 1d8 + your highest ability modifier damage.

✦ **Instinctive Effect:** If you haven't given the demon any commands by the end of your turn, it attacks a bloodied enemy if it can. Otherwise, it moves its speed to a square adjacent to the nearest enemy. If it can do neither of these and a bloodied ally is within its melee reach or charge distance, it attacks that ally instead.

Level 8: The demon's attacks do 1d10 + your highest ability modifier damage and deal 5 extra damage against bloodied targets.

Level 13: The demon becomes size Large. It gains additional +2 bonuses to AC and Fortitude, and its attacks become Melee 2 (one creature).

Level 18: The demon gains phasing.

Level 23: The demon's attacks become Close Blast 2 (creatures in blast).

Level 28: The demon gains a +2 bonus to Reflex and a +2 bonus to Will, and its attacks do ongoing 10 poison damage (save ends).

Origin: The Five Wraiths

You are dying, but not by normal means. You recently discovered a remarkable ancient ritual that, if performed perfectly, would grant the participants eternal life. You persuaded your five closest friends to swear a pact that you would each use this power to shepherd the world and its people prosperously through all its future ages. But something went terribly wrong.

Soon after the ritual, each of you began to fade gradually from existence, becoming light and ephemeral and occasionally translucent. You felt a strange hunger—a craving for vitality and experience.

In your friends, however, this hunger manifested as a mad, destructive impulse. Now, instead of protecting the world as they swore to do, they seek to bring it down with them. They name themselves Strife, War, Hatred, Doom, and Terror, and they have dubbed you Death.

Will you allow these wraiths to break the world you all sought to save? Or will you submit to your fate and fade away?

Associated Skills: Acrobatics, Athletics

Paragon Level

Encounters with your former companions have revealed disturbing insights. As you fade further away, their forms begin to substantiate into shrouds of solid darkness. The remaining wraiths have discovered a new path to immortality: as long as they feed upon the essence of sentient life, their forms shall endure forever. The only way to stop them is to hunt them down and destroy them, or seek a way to reverse the ritual. But time is crucial, because although you possess unique, otherworldly powers, the wraiths have learned to spawn their own kind and now look to remake reality in their own images. The world quakes as shadowy legions of the dead assemble.

Epic Level

Although you have fought and conquered many powerful foes, the shadows of your past loom tall over your diminishing self. An immortal wraith lord has arisen in the world—a creature with which you once laughed and whose bright dreams you once shared. Those dreams have been reversed, because beneath the wraith lord's fist, nations and peoples are blotted out as though they had never been and mortal life hangs upon the brink. Before you fade away completely, one final task remains.

Will the destruction of the wraith lords restore your form? Will you awaken with your friends in the world as you once had dreamt it? Do you go toward oblivion, or will you fade into a new reality, unseen by mortal eyes?

About the Author

Steve Townshend contributed to *Monster Manual* 3 and to several *D&D Insider* projects. This is the second of several articles he has in the works.

Boon

The Fading One — **Level 3+**

You have begun to fade from this life, little by little. One day you will fade away completely, but the legend of your extraordinary power will endure.

Legendary Boon
Special: You gain the following benefit, based on the boon's level. You gain the benefit only for the level of your boon.

Ghostfoot Lvl 3 680 gp
Property: When you make an Athletics check to jump, you gain a +5 bonus and are considered to have a running start.
Power (Encounter): Free Action. *Trigger:* You spend an action point. *Effect:* You can fly your speed until the end of your turn.

Lighter than Wind Lvl 8 3,400 gp
Property: Gain a +2 item bonus to Acrobatics and Athletics checks.
Property: Whenever you make an attack roll after shifting or flying, you gain a +1 power bonus to the attack roll.

Spirit Body Lvl 13 17,000 gp
Property: Gain resist 5 necrotic.
Power (Encounter): Free Action. *Trigger:* You spend an action point. *Effect:* Gain the phasing and insubstantial qualities until the end of your next turn.

Life Drain Lvl 18 85,000 gp
Property: Gain a +2 item bonus to death saving throws.
Power (Daily ✦ Healing, Necrotic): Immediate Reaction. *Trigger:* You hit an enemy with a melee or close attack. *Effect:* Instead of rolling for damage, you deal necrotic damage equal to half your healing surge value and gain an equal number of temporary hit points.

Battle Ghost Lvl 23 425,000 gp
Property: Whenever you charge, you gain the phasing and insubstantial qualities until you complete the charge.
Power (Daily): Immediate Reaction. *Trigger:* You take damage from an attack that bloodies you. *Effect:* Gain the phasing and insubstantial qualities until the end of your next turn.

Touch from Beyond Lvl 28 2,125,000 gp
Property: Whenever you score a critical hit with a melee or close attack, the target is stunned until the end of its next turn.

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DARK SUN

Blood Oasis

(or a Dark Sun short story)

Kevin J. Anderson ✦ illustrations by John Stanko, Zoltan Boros & Gabor Szikszai

Seawater moved against the hull planks like a lover's whisper. The yellow sun of Athas was bright, and a westerly breeze stretched the *Horizon Finder*'s sails, guiding the three-masted carrack toward the seaport of Arkhold.

Unexpected spray whipped up from the bow, and Jisanne laughed. She had untied her long brown hair, letting it blow loose and free. She drew a deep breath with a sense of wonder that these sailors did not feel. They didn't understand how lucky they were to be here.

Captain Hurunn, a wealthy minotaur merchant with a large gold ring in one floppy ear, said, "A long voyage, a full cargo hold, even a net overloaded with fresh fish—time for me to settle down and enjoy my profits." Even when he was in a good mood, Hurunn's voice sounded like a gruff growl. From what little Jisanne knew from her brief previous visits to this glorious time, she doubted the minotaur captain would ever settle down.

With gentle reverence, she touched the opalescent crystal mounted to the compass stand. "The navigation crystal always finds its way back here." She was never sure how clearly the ship's captain and crew could see or hear her.

Hurunn snorted. "It's what the navigation crystal is for—to guide its owner home. It's a simple enough spell."

Jisanne shuddered at his casual attitude, forcing herself to remember that these people did not automatically hate and fear magic users, regardless of whether they were defilers or preservers. Whatever disasters had robbed Athas of this beauty had not happened yet. The world was still fresh and alive, as it had been before its possibilities were stolen.

The *Horizon Finder* entered the mouth of the harbor, and crewmen gathered on deck, waving at the numerous fishing boats, feluccas, and galleys. They were all anxious to get back to port.

High above, the elf lookout yelled, his already-thin voice an even higher pitch. "To arms—sea serpent off the stern! It's following us!"

As the crew scrambled to snag harpoons and bows, a fearsome triangular head rose up, streaming seawater from its golden scales. Its hinged jaw dropped open to reveal long fangs. A short distance away, a second monster rose up.

"That's *two* sea serpents, not one," Hurunn growled. "I need a better lookout for my next voyage."

The pair of serpents glided toward the *Horizon Finder*, intent on attack. Seeing the swollen net of still-squirming fish suspended by a rope and winch above the stern, Jisanne had a sudden realization. "The fish—the serpents want the fish."

"Of course they want the fish. They always want the fish," the minotaur said, not overly concerned. "I was hoping we'd make it all the way to Arkhold, but these waters are infested with cursed sea serpents. A small enough price to pay."

With a deep bellow such as only a minotaur could manage, Hurunn commanded his sailors to swing the boom over the water. The sea serpents pressed closer to the dangling net, snapping at the spray in the carrack's wake. "Dump the catch!"

As twitching fish rained down, the serpents frolicked in the water, greedily feasting. From the rails, the sailors jeered at the monsters, and Hurunn complained—out of habit—about the money he'd just lost. The breeze picked up, blowing the ship safely into port and leaving the sea serpents behind.

Ahead, Jisanne stared at the thriving city. The fortress of a forgotten order of ancient knights sat atop the highest point overlooking the blue harbor. People had gathered down at the docks to welcome the sailing ship. A few ambitious traders even took small boats out to meet the *Horizon Finder*, hoping to strike a sweet deal with Captain Hurunn before he came to the quay.

The minotaur handed Jisanne a flask of wine. "Here, to celebrate. Myself, I don't drink the stuff." He snuffled through his bull nose. "Clogs my sinuses."

She took a swig of the richest, headiest wine she had ever tasted. Everything seemed so unreal.

As the carrack tied up to a long stone quay, Jisanne saw the colorful market stalls full of fresh fruit. Musicians played instruments, their competing tunes a raucous clash of sounds. Jisanne took another drink of wine and glanced down at the pristine navigation crystal. Tears stung her eyes. She didn't want to lose any of this, but she knew . . .

As the scene around her faded, the moist salty air in her nostrils became harsh, sour, and dry. The puffy clouds in the sky shimmered into high blowing dust. The skirling music and the babble of marketplace sounds turned into the moan of desert wind.

"No!" But her cry was just a whisper, words lost in time. Jisanne clutched at the fabric of the world, digging deeper into the arcane magic, not caring where she found the power to hold on for just a few moments longer, but it was no use.

The blue ocean, the lush harbor, the vibrant city were all swallowed into dust. The waves became dunes, the horizon only an empty basin of powder, the Sea of Silt. Exposed by scouring winds, chains of ivory vertebrae and skulls with chipped fangs marked the long-desiccated carcasses of sea serpents. The minotaur captain, his elf lookout, and the rest of the ship's crew didn't notice they were vanishing. *She* was slipping in time, not them.

That Athas, that of the Green Age, was long gone.

Jisanne dropped to her knees on the deck of a skeletal wreck against a crumbling stone quay. Overhead, the bloated red sun was like an angry coal. The ancient flask of wine in her hand was as parched as the landscape. Next to her, propped up by a flat stone, sat a clay bowl half full of her dark, drying blood; the dull shard of the navigation crystal was immersed in the liquid.

Jisanne felt weak and alone, drained. She had powered the magic of the crystal by drawing on her own life force, not caring about the cost of her spell. She had restored the lovely, idyllic landscape of Athas for a time . . . too short a time.

And now she had to face reality again.

* * * *

The crowds cheered in the stands of the Criterion coliseum, whistling, calling for blood. The spectators were all the same, regardless of their social status: powerful templars in special travertine seats near the sand of the arena, aloof patricians who whispered about Balic city business in between bloody combat matches, and unruly commoners crowded in higher seats under the hot red sun.

They roared their approval when Koram strode out of the gladiators' gate, wearing his

white ceremonial sash with the sign of Dictator Andropinis dyed in red; he hated the sash, but was required to wear it. He adjusted armor made of sheets of petrified wood, then looked at the stands with passive disgust. These same people had cheered for him when he was elected a praetor of Balic, and they had likewise cheered when he announced his plans to liberalize the city's laws. Later, when the scheming foreign praetor Yvoluk, darling of Andropinis, disgraced him on false charges, the fickle crowds had cheered just as loudly. Then, after Koram had been shaved bald and thrown into the Criterion to battle monsters, they cheered again, expecting him to die . . . and now they cheered each time he emerged victorious. No one had expected him to survive for seven months in the arena.

The people of Balic would cheer for anything, Koram thought, so long as blood was involved. He felt no further loyalty toward them; he had already paid enough. Praetor Yvoluk had seen to that. Koram's wife and young son were already dead, worked to death in slave camps.

Emerging into the ruddy afternoon sunlight, Koram turned slowly and raised his bronze-inlaid ivory sword. Metal was extremely scarce, and good blades even scarcer; most of the other fighters considered him lucky to have a strengthened and embellished sword. But Koram would never consider himself lucky; he had earned this with blood.

As praetor in charge of the arena, Yvoluk could have warned him what sort of beast he would be fighting this day, but the evil templar liked to keep his surprises. Koram would defeat the opponent just the same. Otherwise it would be surrender.

The spectators continued to whistle and stomp. Koram stood in the shade of the stretched awning that covered the noble seats and part of the sand-covered fighting ground. In the pits below, handlers would force animals and monsters onto elevating platforms and turn them loose through trapdoors in the sand.

Koram heard the rumble of machinery, felt the sand tremble at his feet, and prepared himself. Since being sentenced to the Criterion, he had faced thri-kreen packs, drays, a raaig soulflame, and numerous warriors—human, mul, goliath, it didn't matter. Koram had slain them all because it was the only way for him to survive. He was lucky; he was skilled; he was determined. But he knew Praetor Yvoluk would give him no way out. He hadn't yet figured out how to kill the praetor for what he had done, but he never stopped trying to think of a way.

Koram saw something move beneath the arena floor, stalking him . . . a burrowing creature that sensed the vibrations of his movements. Koram stood absolutely still. Bored, the spectators in the stands shouted out catcalls, but he didn't budge.

In his special box, Dictator Andropinis sat on his throne under the awning, picking at his fingernails. He seemed an elderly man with a thin face and an intent expression, but he was not intent on the gladiatorial combat before him. When the dictator addressed his people, he exuded power. The sorcerer-king of Balic claimed to have been duly elected to his position several centuries ago—and who could gainsay him? Andropinis attended gladiatorial combats out of a sense of duty, not any real interest. Over the many years of his reign, the dictator had seen, and caused, enough death. Right now, he merely appeared bored.

Bursting out of the arena sand, a trio of gray-skinned anakores spat dust from mouths filled with needle-sharp teeth. He identified a large female with a hunched back and a line of thick, knobby protrusions, and two smaller, younger males with smoother hides and gleaming eyes. Anakores hunted in packs, and they would be a formidable team fighting against him.

But he didn't need any assistance. He fought alone.

The first of the younger males lunged toward Koram, and he slashed with his ivory-and-bronze blade. The anakore swung a clawed hand, blinking its black eyes as if unable to see anything but dust, but its wide flat nose smelled him. As Koram danced away, the vibrations of his footfalls were enough to guide the monster.

The second male circled around and dove in as his companion retreated. Koram spun easily on the loose sand, jabbing again to drive the monster away. Then the older female let out a roar that sounded like an avalanche in a cave. In traditional anakore hunting behavior, one would knock a victim to the ground, while others plunged forward to finish him. The female thundered toward him.

But it was a different ploy. Her challenging bellow had distracted Koram long enough for the two males to dart forward, attacking him from both sides.

He easily decapitated the anakore on his left, and the creature's body slid forward with its own momentum while the head went in a different direction. The other male crashed into him, but Koram slammed his armored shoulder into the monster's body, knocking it to the sands. With a quick, hard thrust, he skewered it through the chest.

The crowd cheered, but Koram did not acknowledge them. Dictator Andropinis continued to study his cuticles, never even looking at the combat.

The female howled and hurled herself at him like a boulder from a catapult. Koram barely had time to

recover his balance and lift his sword. As she lunged forward, he swung hard, and the bronze edge of his blade cut the anakore's shoulder. The creature dived again, burying herself in the sand and leaving only a spot of dark blood on the stirred sand.

Koram turned in a slow circle, alert. The two males lay dead on the sand, twitching. He wondered who had caught these creatures in the wild and dragged them here to die in the coliseum. Everything died here, sooner or later.

Some gladiator showmen would have drawn out the battle, making the bloodshed last for most of the afternoon. The people saluted them as heroes, celebrities; those fighters reveled in the attention. Koram, though, didn't care about anyone watching him. He had killed two of the monsters, and he would dispatch the third just as easily.

The female anakore sprang out of the dust again with barely a ripple. Without a flourish, Koram slashed and cut a deep, painful gash along the monster's side. The female reeled, bleeding profusely, and staggered back, retreating from the gladiator. She stopped by the two dead bodies of the younger anakores, swayed and moaned.

Koram stalked forward, but the female did not fight him. She touched the blood from her deep wound, then looked at her dead companions, letting loose a keening howl. "Merrrrrrrrcy." She seemed to say as she dropped her head toward the slain males. "My fammmilleeeeee."

He hesitated, but knew she hadn't said anything of the sort. Still, anger and sickness rose up in him like bile. No one had given any mercy to his family, but he knew he could do nothing for this monster. The female would die here soon enough.

"The only mercy here is a quick death," he said, too quietly for the audience to hear. And without further spectacle, he drove the point of his blade through the monster's chest, ramming it all the way to the hilt to be sure of the kill. He jerked his sword back out, letting the anakore die without more pain. The big female collapsed beside the other two corpses.

The crowd applauded the speedy dispatch of the three enemies, but their response was lukewarm. Without bothering to cut off any of the monsters' heads as a trophy, Koram stalked back toward the gladiators' gate and out of the sun. He was finished for the day.

The lean, bearded praetor stood under the stone arch, his face dark with anger. As Koram walked into the shadows of the tunnels, Yvoluk struck a hard backhand across his sweaty face. "Fight harder, worm dung! Perform for the people—earn another day of your worthless life! You make our opponents seem weak and nonthreatening when you kill them so quickly." His voice was heavily accented; Yvoluk had come from the east, an exile from another city, but he had made a powerful position for himself here.

Koram just looked at the man who had caused him so much pain. "Why don't you face me yourself in the arena? Then I would show you how much I want to fight."

Yvoluk raised his hand threatening to strike him again, but Koram merely strode past and headed to the large underground cells where the gladiators lived. It was not, and would never be, his home. But it was all he had.

Koram had been optimistic once; he had wanted to help the people of Balic. In the showy democracy espoused by the sorcerer-king, ordinary citizens were supposed to have the freedom to speak; they were allowed to run for the office of praetor, whether or not the Council of Patricians or Andropinis approved. Koram had been so naive, so foolish.

An "unapproved" candidate who managed to be elected praetor met with an unfortunate accident before long. In his own case, Koram had asked too many questions in the first months, and Yvoluk had orchestrated his downfall, disgracing him with accusations of graft, turning public opinion against Koram (who had been their favorite only weeks before). Though there was no proof in the charges against him, the people did not believe Koram's vehement denials. He was arrested and stripped of his rank. His wife and son were sold to slave traders for a long march to work Tyr's mines, where they died within weeks. Koram was thrown into the gladiator arena, where he did not have the good sense to die. Seven months later, he continued to fight and kill.

His fellow warriors sulked in their rooms, brooding over their fates. Some oiled their muscles or strapped on armor in preparation for upcoming matches in the arena. A pair of dwarves sparred enthusiastically to hone their fighting skills. A newly captured goliath hunkered on a stone seat in his cell, rocking back and forth, holding his knees; his misery was even larger than his body. An insectile thri-kreen tracker, separated from his two psychically bonded clutch mates, recited poetry through stony mandibles to drown out the goliath's moans. The sandy, chittering thri-kreen claimed to be a nihilistic philosopher, and he accepted his undoubtedly short life as a gladiator.

Koram had befriended none of his comrades. They would be pitted against one another when monster combatants were in short supply, and if Praetor Yvoluk happened to notice that Koram cared for any

particular gladiator, he would take great pleasure in arranging for a death match.

Koram sat on a stone bench and used oil, sand, and a scraper to remove the blood and grit from his skin. He no longer noticed the scabs and scars; all of his motions were mechanical. Another fight, another day.

Before he could lie back and rest on his pallet, however, a call to arms echoed through the barracks beneath the Criterion. Dimly heard through the stone-block walls, the crowds in the stands roared with a sound that was definitely not cheers.

The gladiators stood, looking around in alarm; even the moaning goliath climbed to his feet, keeping his head and shoulders bent so as not to strike his shaggy head against the ceiling. The two sparring dwarves stopped and listened. They recognized the sound of the alarm. "Balic is under attack."

The thri-kreen nihilist changed his song. "Today, our deaths may come in a different manner, but it is death nonetheless." Koram knew that the thri-kreen had been renowned as one of the most skilled trackers in his tribe, but his skills were wasted in the arena.

Though the guards had taken his sword, Koram painstakingly strapped his petrified-wood armor back on. Alarms continued to sound outside in the city, gongs and bells ringing. He didn't hurry.

With a clatter of boots and armor, soldiers marched along the stone-tiled tunnels, led by a dark-visaged Yvoluk. The goliath wrung his hands together and lurched out of his chamber. "Praetor! What is happening?"

Yvoluk's expression soured, as if an olive pit had caught in his throat. "The Skull Wearer leads an army of beast giants to the walls down by the estuary. They've destroyed one of the dictator's forts on the Dragon's Palate, and now they mean to take the city." At a signal from the praetor, the guards lashed their whips, making loud cracks against the stone walls. Yvoluk continued to shout. "Gladiators, our beloved Andropinis demands that you defend the city. You will be armed and sent to the walls. You are our bravest fighters. You will save Balic!"

"Why should we?" Koram asked. At another time, he would have been ready to leap into action, but his city had failed him.

Yvoluk curled his purple lips in a tempting smile. "You need incentive? Drive back the beast giants, and I will ask Andropinis to grant you your freedom. Fight for us this day, and you need never fight in the Criterion again!"

The goliath made a delighted sound, while the sparring dwarves squared their shoulders and grinned. The soldiers handed the gladiators their familiar weapons and rushed them out of the barracks and into the city streets. Koram intentionally wadded the sash that marked him as a fighter for Andropinis and left it behind on the bench in his cell.

The thri-kreen tracker matched Koram's pace, leaning over to whisper, "Do you trust Praetor Yvoluk to follow through on his promise?"

"As much as I would trust a footpath across the open Sea of Silt."

Behind them, the goliath moaned again.

From across the city, soldiers were mustering toward the wall that overlooked the dry estuary where hundreds of faded, dusty silt skimmers tied up to the docks. Yvoluk led the hapless gladiators to the top of the stone barricade, confident in his power.

A deafening tumult thundered from the harbor below. Koram and the gladiators gazed down upon a large army of towering monsters. Hundreds of beast-head giants waded the silt shallows, slogging through parched, pale depths that would have drowned any man. The giants' heavy armor weighed them down, but they plodded ahead, stirring up clouds of fine dust. Their heads were a menagerie of ferocious creatures, fanged feline predators, reptilian saurians, bloodthirsty lupine monsters, sharp-beaked birds of prey.

At the lead of the encroaching army stood a dominating figure, a huge giant with necklace of skulls that dangled from a thick cord at his throat. The most fearsome of the beast giants, Skull Wearer supposedly drew power from the spirits of those he had slain—and he had slain many. With legendary animosity toward the civilized inhabitants of Balic, he had led many previous raids against the city, but Koram had never seen an army like this before. Dark energy thrummed around the giant leader as he let out a roar of challenge; the hundreds of beast giants marching through the silt echoed the shout.

"Skull Wearer has long hated Andropinis," Yvoluk said. "You must protect our sorcerer-king and save Balic!"

Below, the beast giants reached the docks, ripped the silt skimmers free of their moorings and smashed the hulls. Pressing their shoulders against the pilings, two reptile-headed giants shattered a sturdy dock, tearing it down. The attackers swarmed forward in a frenzy, wrecking all of the boats.

Most of the silt sailors had evacuated as the enemy army approached, but a last few men ran toward the gates, desperate to get inside. The Balic guards refused to open the reinforced barriers, despite the ever-increasing pleas. Beast giants grabbed the frantic sailors and battered them into ooze against the wall.

Skull Wearer shouted another challenge for Dictator Andropinis. More giants pressed forward like the waves of a long-forgotten tide. It seemed impossible that anyone could protect the city against such an invasion; Koram could see that he and his comrades would all die in the first line of defense. He glanced at the dwarves, the thri-kreen tracker, even the miserable goliath; they all realized the hopelessness of their position, as well.

Yvoluk raised his hands, filled with enthusiasm. "This will be your greatest battle—for the glory of Andropinis and Balic." The praetor stepped to the edge of the wall, gesturing toward the giant hordes below. "If you survive this day, you will have your freedom. I promise." He seemed to expect cheers.

Koram reached out, gave the man a hard shove, toppling him off the wall into the press of giants. Yvoluk flailed as he fell, too astonished even to scream.

Koram had acted without thinking, sure he was dead either way. "I am through fighting for your benefit."

Seeing his action, the other gladiators immediately came to the same conclusion. The goliath rose up and battered soldiers on either side of him, toppling them off the wall. The thri-kreen laughed in surprise and delight, clacking his mandibles as he turned on the astonished guards, and the two dwarves began to fight.

In response to the unexpected turmoil above, the beast giants pounded on their shields, then hammered on the gates with stony fists like battering rams. A volley of spears arced upward, shafts as thick as small trees, and struck into the crowded guards and spectators.

The gladiators continued to fight atop the wall, throwing the Balic soldiers into chaos. Skull Wearer summoned the magic he had drawn from the ghosts of his victims, unleashing a dark thunderstorm of power against the harbor city.

Before long, Dictator Andropinis arrived with his escort, shouting out his own spells as he drew power to defend Balic. The air itself began to crackle and tremble as the surrounding trees and plants wilted, the ground turning as black as charcoal, its vital energy sucked away.

In the confusion, Koram turned his back on the front lines, waved his bone-and-bronze sword to chase panicked soldiers and citizens out of his way. Some of his gladiator comrades fought anyone and everyone with great glee, giving their last great battle performance; others scampered away, seeking a place to hide.

Koram felt not a flicker of guilt for abandoning his city. He thought of the three anakore lying dead in the arena—his latest victims. He thought of his own family, killed through treachery. He had killed enough. He would not shed his blood to protect the sorcerer-king or his duplicitous citizens, nor would he stay and revel in the city's destruction.

He was done.

Koram made his way to the far exit gates that were not yet blocked. Before long, the city's back gates and side entrances would be clogged with citizens racing into the hills as they realized the true desperation of their plight.

He would set out into the wilderness and find his own path of survival. Considering what he had been through, he knew he would fare better alone under the dark sun of Athas than amidst the treachery of Balic.

* * * *

Living aboard the petrified skeleton of the *Horizon Finder*, Jisanne had the city ruins to herself. No caravans or silt schooners came this far south. Arkhold received no visitors except for the rare and foolish adventurer in search of forgotten treasures. Knowing how people were likely to treat a magic user, Jisanne hid whenever she saw a stranger; more often than not, the perils of the abandoned city drove them off before she had to worry.

Jisanne was on her own, just as she wanted to be.

However, the desiccated place provided little for her survival. She caught rodents and lizards to eat; she set up scattered cisterns to hoard the reluctant droplets of water that rained down twice a year. But it wasn't enough, and she had to venture out on regular supply expeditions.

As the red sun lumbered over the grainy horizon, Jisanne stood on the ruins of the stone quay, facing the expanse of the Silt Sea. Her voice hoarse from thirst, she shouted a summoning spell for a floating mantle, one of the mysterious but gentle beasts of the deep wastes.

Her hands trembled and her head throbbed as she called upon the power. It would have been so much easier, so much faster, to steal the life energy of the surrounding flora and fauna, but Jisanne refused such shortcuts. She knew in her heart that the excessive and indiscriminate use of that sort of magic had wrung Athas dry. By using the navigation crystal, she had been able to visit the lush past, and she knew what the defilers had done to a healthy world.

Magic users were widely hated across Athas. All her life, Jisanne had tried to preserve the life of the world, never harming anyone, and yet, when her abilities were discovered, the people of Balic had punished her. As a hermit, far from any people, Jisanne was much safer. But the pain of her loss did not go away.

Answering her summons, the floating mantle appeared in a blurry brown corona of dust. The jellyfishlike creature drifted on the thermals, trailing thin tentacles to the silt. It hovered at the end of the stone quay, then lowered its enormous body to the ground so she could mount.

"Thank you for coming." Jisanne had no idea if the creature could understand her. Securing her sacks, pots, and supply pack, she climbed onto the leathery dome, grasping the ridges and nodules. Air flaps vented gas as the floating mantle exhaled, then rose into the air and propelled itself along, carrying her away from Arkhold and across the impassible expanse.

She ventured to the more fertile, and more dangerous, highlands of the Dragon's Palate as rarely as possible. The Palate was close to Balic, and she never intended to go back home again. That was where happiness had been burned out of her—not by any defiling magic, but by human hatred.

Years ago, Jisanne lived in Balic with her older sister Selanne, who had a husband and two fine daughters. Unmarried, Jisanne helped wherever she could, often secretly drawing upon the power of the living to ease their existence. But she wasn't cautious enough. Jisanne was a preserver, not a defiler. Her magic was powered by the life force of Athas itself, but she never went so far with her spells that she hurt anyone or anything. Even though she knew full well the difference between what she did and the destructive magic of those with no regard for life, most common people didn't understand, didn't try, or didn't care.

Jisanne had ignored the rumors about her, the whispers when she and Selanne walked through the forum market, the way other people shunned their house. Oblivious, she had gone out one day to pick olives in a grove near a crumbling noble estate. Returning home at sunset with a full basket, she had found her sister's family murdered, the house burned. A mob had scrawled hateful words in the ashes—they had mistaken Selanne as a defiler.

Before they could come for her, too, Jisanne fled. She did not stop until she had reached the end of inhabited territory, and even then she kept going all the way to Arkhold. The mummified ruins of the abandonded port city seemed the perfect place for her. However, time had not lessened the pain of her massacred loved ones. Those nightmares remained as vivid as the navigation crystal's visions of ancient Athas. . . .

The floating mantle brought her to soupy mud flats at the shore of the Dragon's Palate. A thin stream trickled down from the foothills, where the scrub forest thickened. *That would do.*

She landed the docile beast near a dryer patch of thick grasses, and slid down its rubbery curved back. When she released it from her spell, the jellyfish creature floated away from the mud flats, heading back out to the silt barrens. Her quest here would take some time and require a great deal of caution. The steep mountains of the Dragon's Palate were inhabited by ferocious beast giants; fortunately, a military outpost from Balic kept the giants busy.

Jisanne filled her water containers upstream, then placed the heavy jugs in a subtly marked cache, where she could retrieve them before she headed home. Then, with empty sacks tied at her waist, she explored the forest in search of edible berries, roots, mushrooms, fruits, and herbs.

A pang of loneliness stabbed her, but she had fended for herself so long. Only once had Jisanne let down her guard and trusted a stranger in the Arkhold ruins—and that lapse had nearly killed her. She had revealed herself to a half-elf treasure-seeker who had looked so friendly, so earnest. The lone adventurer had captivated her with his story, his passion, and Jisanne had shown him the navigation crystal, had revealed to him the erstwhile splendor of Athas.

Jisanne had been so desperate for companionship that she had believed in him—until he had stolen the crystal. As the thief had run away with mocking laughter, taking a shortcut out onto the sands, a tentacled Silt Horror had grabbed him before he'd even realized his danger. Hearing his screams, Jisanne felt no sympathy. Later, she retrieved the navigation crystal from where it had dropped to the ground next to his corpse and held it tightly. From that point on, Jisanne hid whenever she saw a visitor.

As she filled her sacks with edibles from the forest, she took comfort in knowing the navigation crystal was hidden in a small pouch tied on the inside of her breeches. She had to exercise great care to avoid detection from the marrauding giants on the island; their main lair was to the north, closer to Balic. She was safe here, where she could hear, and hide from, the crashing approach of any plodding giant hunter.

She did not, however, notice the trap set by the band of feral halflings.

As she foraged, the small wild-eyed savages had stalked and surrounded her in utter silence. The halfling hunters scuttled ahead, lying in wait with their ropes and nets, and then they sprang.

The vicious little men hurled bolos at her, several of which missed, but one caught around her leg, and another struck her head, wrapping around her neck.

"Fresh human! Tender human!"

"Take her back to the village."

Jisanne clawed at the bolos—and then the halflings dropped a net on top of her. They pounced, driving her to the ground.

"Bring her to the other captives."

"If we have any left!" The last comment was met with cackles of laughter and howls of disappointment.

A stocky leader thumped his chest in triumph, and hefted a sword made from a giant's sharpened femur. "Another victory for Borodro!"

"But we *all* caught her, Borodro—" whined one of the younger halflings.

With a slash of his giant-bone sword, Borodro decapitated the complainer, and the severed head continued to whistle and grimace as it rolled on the dry leaves of the ground. The leader gave a snort. "Look, Delfi keeps complaining even without a body." The halflings' initial gasps of horror turned to laughter, cheers, and grumbling stomachs. "Bring his body back to the village." They seemed satisfied with that.

Jisanne thrashed in the net, struggling to tear the tough strands. She didn't waste energy or breath demanding to be freed, since that would do no good. Everyone knew the cruelty of halfling raiders and slavers. She tried to work an escape spell, but failed; she was already weak and had used much magic to summon and control the floating mantle. She needed time and concentration.

"Tenderize her," said Borodro, "then let's get back to the village."

The halfling hunters fell upon Jisanne with sticks and clubs. She covered her head to protect herself, but the blows were too many. . . .

Some time later, she awoke, a mass of pain, trussed up and carried along, as the halflings whistled their satisfaction. Jisanne clamped her bruised lips together to keep from making a sound. She heard shouts and cheers from more halflings ahead as they arrived at the village, a ring of stone houses that surrounded a stone pyramid.

Halflings were notorious slavers, and Borodro had said he kept other human captives, though none were readily visible. The halflings dumped her into a small, filthy pen with walls made of twisted thorn branches. Her hands and ankles remained bound.

Jisanne tried to concentrate so she could gather power for her magic, draw power slowly from the surrounding plants and trees, perhaps even from the halflings themselves. If she garnered strength gradually, she might not alert the vicious little beasts to what she was doing.

She could have just ripped the power from the fabric of the world, stealing as much life force as required, but even to save her own life, Jisanne was reluctant to destroy life by turning to the corrupting magic. The only time she truly defiled nature was to activate the navigation crystal, and that was . . . necessary. For now, she would find another way.

The halflings left Jisanne in the pen, focused on other interests now, jabbering and chuckling. "I'm hungry."

"They better not have gnawed all the bones!"

"Save me a tender piece," Borodro said. The other halfling hunters dumped the decapitated body of their comrade on the trampled ground. "And start cooking Delfi. Throw in a lot of garlic so he doesn't taste so gamey."

Jisanne realized that there were no other captives. Several human carcasses—mostly picked clean—were being roasted over a bed of orange coals near the stone pyramid. The returning hunters rushed over to the cookfire and squabbled over the remaining meat.

She felt a sickening wrench in her gut. Halfling cannibals were the worst.

Sweating, in pain from her contusions and cracked bones, Jisanne closed her eyes and began to concentrate on scraps of magic, pulling together any possibilities for her escape. She didn't have much time.

* * * *

Koram walked away and never looked back at the Balic skyline. He did not listen to the mayhem as Skull Wearer and his beast giant army hammered the walls, did not flinch as sorcerer-king Andropinis fought back with arcane magic. He heard explosions, screams, a loud ripping roar . . . and he kept walking. It was no longer his battle; perhaps it had never been.

With his sword he cut the mooring rope of a fully stocked silt skimmer, then set sail out into the estuary. As a youth, in happier days in the great walled city, he had learned how to guide and levitate the skimmers on his impetuous adventures in the surrounding area. Now, though, this was no mere lighthearted expedition. He would never return.

The hot, dry breezes blew him past other coastal villages, then he turned east into deeper silt, crossing to the hazy highlands of the Dragon's Palate, where he hoped to live off the land.

After he beached the silt skimmer at sunset, Koram set up camp in the trees; he slept little, with his back against a sturdy trunk, as he listened to creatures stalking the night. He had no plan, no goal—and it felt liberating. Before, he had lived for his family, for his city, to make a better existence for all the citizens of Balic. He had worked hard and dedicated himself for people he cared about. And after his disgrace, he had been forced to fight and kill for people he hated.

Now all that was gone, the good and the bad. He owed nothing to anyone. He would heal, he would survive, and one day perhaps he would find something else to believe in.

Next day, he continued to explore the island, finding the ruins of a Balic fort whose inhabitants had been slaughtered, probably by Skull Wearer's giants. He picked through the wreckage and took what he needed, but he did not want to stay at the site of a recent massacre.

Contnuing his explorations, he encountered a commotion ahead, shouts and snapping branches. He heard the halfling warrior party crashing through the forest long before he saw them. He decided they must be bad warriors to be so noisy and obvious . . . and then he realized they were chasing someone.

A young woman burst out of the trees, running wildly; long brown hair streamed behind her. She looked battered and exhausted. When the woman saw Koram, they both froze. He had not intended to save anyone, and she looked just as reluctant to accept his help, but the yips, howls, and high-pitched curses of the pursuers drove her toward him.

"Halflings," she said, heaving great breaths. "I used my magic to escape . . . not much left now. And no time."

"Magic?" Koram tightened the grip on the hilt of his sword. "I have no love for defilers."

"I don't defile. I'm a survivor—so far. You'll come with me if you hope to survive."

Bounding forward with a speed and agility that belied his stocky body, the halfling leader raced out of the trees, waving his bone sword. He skidded to a halt, his eyes bugging out as he saw the armored gladiator, then he yelled back to the trees. "Hey, hurry up! I've caught another one!"

Brazen with confidence, the woman whirled to face the halfling. "Leave us, Borodro—and maybe we won't kill you."

Borodro laughed. "I have fifty followers right behind me!"

"I counted forty-five," she said.

He paused to tally them again in his mind. "More than enough."

Since he had done nothing to provoke the halfling hunter, had made no sign of even choosing sides in the dispute, Koram was taken off-guard as Borodro threw himself forward like a rabid animal. With fierce and unhindered swordwork, the feral halfling landed the first blow and chipped one of Koram's petrified-wood armor plates.

As a gladiator, Koram had fought many different opponents, and so he adjusted his combat technique accordingly. His arena fighting skills took over, automatic and without mercy. He had not meant to fight again, did not want to get involved in this squabble . . . but he could not simply ignore this woman. If he had fought back earlier, if he had defended his family against the guards who came to take him, maybe he could have saved his wife and son. Koram parried the halfling's sharpened-femur sword with his own bronze edge, hammering so hard he splintered the giant bone. Borodro hesitated in surprise at the ferocity of the blow.

With a curled fist, Koram smashed the halfling leader in the nose, drawing forth a surprised yowl and a burst of blood. As the enrgaged Borodro threw himself against the gladiator again, Koram impaled him on his sword. The halfling collapsed, wailing as his blood poured out.

In the dense trees nearby, the remaining forty-five halfling pursuers heard their leader's death scream, then raised their own voices.

Koram held his sword and stood his ground; he did not even know who this woman was, but he was certain he could never defeat so many halfling cannibals.

The woman yanked a small pouch from her breeches and unwrapped it to reveal a rough shard of crystal. She looked up at Koram, wild-eyed. "No way around it now. I can use Borodro's life force before he dies, and I'll probably have to drain a dozen trees, too. But it's either defiling magic, or we both die."

Anger flared inside him. "I refuse to be part of defilement."

On the ground, Borodro coughed blood and wheezed out a death rattle. Wearing a grim expression, the woman knelt next to the dying halfling, working her hands around the crystal. "Normally I would use my own blood, my own strength, but this creature has already taken enough lives." She spat in the halfling's face to express her loathing, then she looked with greater sympathy at Koram. "You saved me. I'll save you. I'll take you to . . . a better place."

As she summoned the power to activate the crystal, Borodro wailed and writhed, then shriveled to dust. The grasses and weeds on the ground withered as the circle of defiling magic spread, drinking life energy from anything it touched. Tall trees turned brown, creaking, splintering.

Koram yelled at her, "I do not want—"

Then the first members of the halfling hunting party charged forward out of the trees waving their weapons. They all looked hungry.

The crystal in her palm glowed as she finished her spell.

The world shimmered—and they were both in a different place. Koram's next breath tasted of moisture, life, flowers, and leaves. Nearby, a brook tumbled over mossy rocks on its way downhill. The shadowy monster-infested forest was now glittering with birdsong and gentle breezes. Even the sun in the sky was bright yellow, rather than a dull bloody red.

He stared in awe, then looked at the woman, demanding explanations. "Where have you taken me?"

The magic user shuddered in disgust at what she had done. The rough crystal in her bloodstained palm emitted a yellowish glow. "This is Athas . . . our world, before the sorcerer-kings and corrupt magic users wrung it dry."

"How did we get here?" The gladiator looked around, worried that Borodro's cannibal halflings had followed them through time. "How do we get back." He had not intended to stay with this woman. The wounds and memories were still too fresh in his mind and heart, and he did not want to cast his lot with a stranger. It would not be fair to her, or to him.

The woman—who told him her name was Jisanne—looked down at the strange glassy shard she held. "Ancient sailors used this navigation crystal to take them home. *This* time period, this version of Athas, was the home of a powerful ship's captain." Though her skin was covered with bruises and she walked with obvious pain, Jisanne set off down the slope, following the stream. "I've brought us here. Look around you. Are you so anxious to be back in your harsh world?"

He found the fresh, green, *living* landscape remarkable . . . but its very strangeness was intimidating. "I have lost my family, and lost my interest. Little matters to me anymore. But I will . . . stay with you until I'm sure you are safe."

She regarded him with a hard expression. "I have taken care of myself for a long time, and I don't need a protector." She drew a deep breath. "But you are here with me now. I prefer this time and place, when the world was young and healthy—but my magic isn't strong enough to make it permanent. Come, we don't have much time."

Koram followed her down the slope to a wide blue river course—clear, swift-flowing water dotted with colorful sails of trading ships, oared dromonds from the city guard, even pleasure craft. He recognized it. "This is the estuary!"

"The way it once was." Jisanne led him along the shore. "This is how Athas was meant to be."

His heart felt leaden, wishing his wife and son could see this. "I suppose if we are trapped here . . . I would not complain." He could make a new home here, a new life far from his memories.

"It won't last." Jisanne scanned the shore, looking for something. "I stole life energy for this spell. Defiling magic is the only way to activate the navigation crystal, and it will fade soon enough."

He was uneasy with her casual use of the corrupting power, but he also knew that otherwise he would be dying right now, his body pierced with halfling arrows and blades. Jisanne had saved both of them. He owed her a debt of gratidute.

When he had turned his back on Balic, he had severed all ties, washing his hands of the evil government that had destroyed his family and the fickle people who had shown him no loyalty, no support. Though he had little to live for, once he'd left the arena, he did not want to die. Given time, perhaps Koram would find a reason that meant something—and someone who deserved it.

After they had rushed along through the peaceful forest, Jisanne let out a happy cry and hurried through the underbrush to a small rowboat tied to a drooping tree trunk. "Come, we must head south as fast as we can, while the spell lasts. Unless you'd rather travel across the silt?"

Though he didn't know what she meant, her urgency was plain. Koram climbed into the boat, took the oars, then guided them out into the fast-flowing estuary. "Where are we going?"

"South—to Arkhold. To my home."

After a lifetime of considering desolation to be the normal state of the world, he marveled at the bounty of water, the moisture in the air, the fractured-gold flashes of sunlight on the river's ripples. As he rowed vigorously, water splashed on the caked dust and blood on his skin; it felt cool and strange as the fresh breezes dried it quickly. A strange stirring occurred in his chest, and the weight on his shoulders seemed less heavy. Koram began to feel *alive* again.

As they made good time along the current, Jisanne told him her story, and he shared his own. She didn't seem at all astonished to hear of Praetor Yvoluk's cruelty or how the fickle people of Balic had so easily turned on him. They had done the same to her. Jisanne explained how ancient sorcerer-kings had abused dark powers, draining the world year after year, spell after spell, war after war.

"Defiling magic did this to Athas—and now I have used it to bring us back to a time before the world was destroyed." She shook her head in disgust at herself. "Ironic, isn't it? In order to visit an Athas untainted by the parasitical magic, I need to drain more life force from the land."

"Either way, we are here." Koram rowed as hard as he could, carrying them far down the watercourse.

They traveled for many leagues before the magic weakened. As Jisanne felt it fade, she urged him to pull the boat to the shallows.

With a wrenching disappointment, they watched the green shore and blue current curl and evaporate, changing from a verdant paradise to a barren brown wasteland. The Athas he was used to seeing. He felt suddenly hollow and lost, and he had to bite back a cry of disappointent.

The small boat ground ashore and fell apart with the sudden weight of age, disintegrating into dry and ancient splinters. The two found themselves in the rocks on the edge of a bone-dry canyon. "We'll have to walk from here. Arkhold isn't far," Jisanne said.

He hesitated, looking around at the stark rocks and dry desert. "I did not intend to stay."

She looked uncertain. "You saved my life. I prefer being alone, and I never said I wanted company. . . . But stay and rest. You can find your own path tomorrow."

Together, they trudged back to her skeletal ship, the dry docks, and the silt-buried old harbor city. He gave a gruff answer. "No place else to be."

* * * *

Dust-shrouded Arkhold was dead, empty . . . and peaceful. When she and Koram reached her make-shift home aboard the *Horizon Finder*, Jisanne fell into a deep, exhausted sleep. It took days for her to recover from the magic she had used, and so Koram did not leave. He tended her, brought her food and water, and kept watch against the ever-present dangers of the desert.

She could not shake the disheartened realization of how willingly she had turned to defiling magic to summon the past centuries of Athas. When possible, she would use her own blood to work the spell, drawing upon willingly surrendered life energy to trigger the crystal. A spell could be more permanent if not forced and stolen—but she had to use what she could. Jisanne knew she would do it again. Every moment she experienced in that long-lost period was worth the sacrifice, even if she had to steal the energy from other living creatures. It could rapidly become too easy. . . .

The gladiator from Balic wanted nothing from her, put no obligations on her, posed no threat. She had come to this place intentionally, hiding from her past; the other strangers she had encountered here were greedy, driven, dangerous. Koram, though, had cut himself off from the strings that bound him to his city and he had let the hot winds of circumstance blow him wherever they wished. And they had brought him to her.

While she continued to recover, Koram trudged off into the rugged land nearby. He returned a day later with three large iguanas he had caught, a pouch of leathery-shelled turtle eggs, and several wrinkled gourds that held water. If not for him, Jisanne doubted she could have survived.

For his own part, he also seemed to be healing just by staying with her in the empty quiet. The two kept their distance from each other, kept their silence, but eventually they talked more, surprised to find how much they were alike. Though the man carried no happiness within him, at least he seemed to find an inner contentment being here. In the evenings he would sit with her, and gradually opened up, talking more and more.

"I had to shut out all of my pain and anger just to survive in the arena. But I don't like to be so empty. When you showed me the past, you made me see how healthy this world once was . . . and could be again. Maybe my life can become whole again, as well." He hung his head. The bristles of hair had begun to regrow from his shaved scalp. "I will hold onto that hope."

With a wistful sigh, Jisanne thought of the glorious, vibrant past. "If we could return there, I would turn my back on all of Athas without a second's regret . . . the way you turned away from Balic."

Koram made a rumbling sound in his chest. "I would do it in a second."

* * * *

The peace could last only so long.

Just as the first flames of dawn scorched the Sea of Silt, a bellowing voice echoed through Arkhold. "Gladiator Koram, come out and meet your master—and your death! The smell of your treachery makes you easy to follow."

Belowdecks in the petrified old sailing ship, Koram recognized the voice, a sound that had come from beyond the grave. He leaped off his pallet and grabbed his sword, but did not have time to strap on his armor. Koram said to Jisanne, "Hide here. He doesn't want you."

She sat bolt upright, her eyes wide. "Who is it? Who tracked you here?"

"Praetor Yvoluk. He survived somehow. I suppose a soul as twisted as his cannot be easily crushed." He hefted his bone-and-bronze sword. "If I kill him, I'll be back."

Jisanne took out the navigation crystal, drew a deep breath. "I am strong enough to use magic again. Let me help you fight him."

"That would be a waste of your life. Yvoluk has already taken my wife and son. That is enough." He stalked off and climbed the ladder out of the hold.

He no longer felt empty and aimless. If he was going to face a hated enemy again, at least now he had a reason to fight.

He did not hear Jisanne whisper under her breath, "And *I* lost my sister and her whole family because I wasn't there to protect them."

Emerging onto the open deck, Koram saw a silt dromond bearing Balic's flag. Powered by a psionic helm, the large ship hovered above the dust, separated by less than a meter from the *Horizon Finder*'s starboard bow. In the fleet maneuvers of Dictator Andropinis, Koram had seen these fearsome ships glide across the desert like giant sharks in the sky.

Smug, Yvoluk stood on the dromond's bow next to the thri-kreen tracker, the nihilist philosopher who had also fought in the Criterion; the chittering thri-kreen bobbed his rounded head, his faceted eyes gleaming in the bright daylight. "You see, Praetor—I told you I could track him." In his segmented limbs, the thri-kreen held the rumpled sash of Andropinis that Koram had left behind in his cell. Five more Balic soldiers stood behind them, armed and ready to fight.

When the tracker saw Koram's angry scowl at the betrayal, he shouted to the other ship. "It makes no difference. If we'd been pitted against each other, you would have killed me or I'd have killed you. It is nothing personal."

The words were dry as they came out of Koram's mouth. "I won't hold any sympathy or any grudge against you. My grudge is with Yvoluk."

The praetor's laugh sounded like splintering wood. "And my grudge is with *you*, Koram. You cast me to my death, but magic cushioned my fall. Unluckily for the beast giants, they have a strong life force. Using it to power my magic was as easy as poking a hole in a wineskin. I was nearly buried among the corpses I had slain." Behind him, the five warriors drew their blades and bows, ready to attack, but Yvoluk motioned them back. He seemed proud of what he had done.

"I crawled out of the zone of death just as Dictator Andropinis cast his own spell from the wall above. He unleashed such terrible magic that he felled dozens of giants, not to mention several hundred cowardly soldiers with a single spell. He called up a lava storm in the estuary, enough to send Skull Wearer and his minions fleeing. I barely scaled the wall myself." The praetor shook his head like a disappointed parent. "But you had already run away, Koram. You gave us quite a chase."

"Then I will save you further trouble. When you forced me to fight opponents in the Criterion, I had no reason to kill them. Now, though, I have all the reasons I need." Koram bent his powerful legs and sprang across the gap from the *Horizon Finder* to the levitating dromond.

* * * *

Jisanne was already rallying her magic as she emerged onto the deck. She saw Koram land on the adjacent silt dromond to face his enemy, yelling, "Fight me, Yvoluk! I have waited long enough for this."

The Balic templar just laughed. "And why should I bother fighting you when I have others to do so?" He motioned for his fighters, and three of the men nocked arrows to bowstrings; the other two lifted their short swords and crouched to charge.

With anger roiling through her, Jisanne stepped out of the shadows and began to work her first spell. Drawing energy from all around her in a quick rush, she felt the tension build within her. Her need justified whatever means she might employ, even defilement—fast, powerful, and deadly magic. "Leave us alone!"

Spotting her, the thri-kreen tracker gave an alarmed squawk and his small antennae lifted, twitching. "Koram sent a defiler against us!"

With instinctive terror, Yvoluk's warriors fired their arrows without any command from the praetor. Three shafts leaped out from twanging bows. One of the arrows clattered on the *Horizon Finder*'s deck—but the other two struck Jisanne, one in the left side of her chest, the second in her abdomen. The impacts drove her backward.

With a howl, Koram thrust his sword deep into the traitorous thri-kreen's back, piercing the tan chitin; the thri-kreen's lower set of legs folded, and he fell to his knees, dragging Koram's sword with him, caught in his hard shell. "Ah, so this is how it ends. . . ." He whistled through his mandibles.

Jisanne gasped as her spell died around her. She tried to keep uttering the words, but only blood came out of her mouth, not the rest of the incantation.

With a barked command from Yvoluk, the soldiers fell upon Koram, five against one. Even as he struggled to tear his sword free from the thri-kreen's body, the warriors swarmed over him, thrusting and stabbing.

Lying in a pool of her own blood on the deck of the *Horizon Finder*, Jisanne saw an image of her sister's family cut down by mob hatred. Yes, she did know how to use arcane magic, and now her own blood gave her all the power she needed to finish the spell.

The silt stirred beneath the levitating dromond. A line of ivory vertebrae moved in a serpentine ripple, and a pair of ribcages lifted up through the sand. Balanced on puzzle-pieces of stacked bones, two saurian skulls dropped open hinged jaws to brandish sand-worn fangs. The long-dead sea serpents both roared, a dry rasping sound that scratched through their hollow throats. Once so majestic as they glided on Athas's long-forgotten seas, the fossilized monsters now loomed over the levitating dromond. Jisanne clenched her bloodied fists, drove the monsters into action.

Yvoluk's warriors looked up and screamed, scrambling away from Koram. The praetor stared in awe, craning his neck up at the giant fanged skulls, then frantically worked his own spell to protect himself—but before he could finish, one of the skeleton serpents darted forward and chomped down. Lifting the bleeding templar in the air, the serpent shook him from side to side, bit him in half, then tossed the severed body off the dromond. Yvoluk was still gurgling as he sank into the silt.

Jisanne crawled to the side rail, lifted herself up, and extended a red hand toward Koram. On the levitating dromond, he was a patchwork of deep wounds, bleeding from numerous slashes and cuts, many of them surely fatal. She tried to call his name, but her lungs were filled with blood.

Koram dragged himself to the bow and somehow found the strength to make a staggering leap back to the *Horizon Finder*. Jisanne attempted to catch him, and they both tumbled together. One of the arrow shafts snapped off inside, and the pain blinded her.

Even without her magical control, the skeletal serpents continued to attack the dromond. Ivory skulls smashed the planks, broke the hull, shattered the rails. The serpents seized the terrified Balic soldiers in their jaws, tossing bodies over the side or leaving them strewn across the deck. The dromond crashed, running aground onto the stone quay.

Jisanne and Koram held each other, barely hearing the screams and the mayhem. Drowning in the pain, she felt the magic fade. The twin sea-monster skeletons raised sinuous bone necks as if in a salute, then crumbled into ivory shards in the dust.

Jisanne knew she was dying, and beside her Koram grasped her hand. His wounds looked even worse than hers. "Do you have the navigation crystal?" he said. "Take us back . . . to when Athas was alive."

With an effort she removed the dull-edged object, wet fingers fumbling with the strings of the pouch. "The magic won't last. It destroys. It is what drained this world."

He leaned closer, his breath rattling. "Then I give you my life energy willingly—take it! I'd rather die there than in this place."

Jisanne cupped the navigation crystal in her palm. Each breath was like broken glass caught on fire; the arrow deep in her stomach was a grinding spear of ice that twisted in her guts. "Maybe with my life force, too, it will be enough to seal the spell permanently."

Koram could barely hold his head up. He was fading quickly. If she didn't act soon, the opportunity would be wasted.

Jisanne clenched her fingers around the crystal. Previously, she had filled a small bowl with her own blood, just enough to work the arcane magic. Now there was so much blood, but she felt so weak . . . and Koram was so weak.

She pulled the spell from her own core, stronger than ever before. Jisanne used everything she had, and everything Koram had. She scraped both of their existences until they were bone dry and empty, she pulled on any life force around them, the waning energy of the dying guards, the small burrowing creatures in the ground, every faint flicker she could find. Even the sand and dust turned dark. She had never called on so much life force to fuel her magic.

Her vision faded into static and grit, and she could see only the crystal in her hand. Jisanne tried to hold onto it, but the object dulled, then crumbled into small shards and glittering dust in her hand.

Destroyed.

Jisanne collapsed, feeling the weight of Koram beside her but no life there, and no life inside her either. . . .

Then the deck began rocking beneath them, and the bright sun beating down seemed to have a different quality. The air Jisanne inhaled was moist and salty—and as she sucked in a lungful she realized that the arrow wounds no longer hurt. The spell had worked after all!

With a loud snort, a deep voice grumbled at them. "I see you are back, lady magic user—and you have brought a fighter, too. He looks strong enough, but lazy. Lounging around on the deck—hmmf!" The minotaur captain stood over the two of them.

Koram picked himself up, touching his bare chest and searching unsucessfully to find his deep wounds.

"Are you going to sleep all day?" Hurrun put his powerful hands on his hips. "This ship has places to go—I am not running an inn at sea!"

Jisanne got to her feet and looked off the starboard bow to see the beautiful harbor city of Arkhold with its whitewashed buildings on the hills, the large marketplace down by the docks, the colorful sails of small fishing boats.

"We are glad to be here, Captain," Jisanne said. She felt more solid now than ever before, more *real* in this time.

Koram was amazed. "Please let us stay."

"All right, I won't throw you overboard just yet." The minotaur turned and stalked back toward the bow. "Just make yourselves useful."

Because they had surrendered their life energy voluntarily, perhaps they had twisted the nature of the defiling magic, and the navigation crystal had incorporated them into the past, into its memory of "home." Maybe they were really here, or maybe it was only a recorded vision that had an objective and persistent reality of its own. Either way, it didn't matter.

"This is our permanent place now, Koram," she said, convinced as she stood beside him. "We both made it so. This spell will never fade." They faced the sun—the golden yellow sun.

Science fiction and fantasy novelist **Kevin J. Anderson** was born on March 27, 1962, and raised in Wisconsin. His novels have appeared on national bestseller lists, and he has more than 11 million books in print worldwide. The prolific writer is well known for his immense contributions to the Star Wars and Dune shared worlds, and his solo projects (among them The Saga of Seven Suns septet of epic novels) have achieved tremendous critical and popular acclaim. Outside of novels, Kevin has also written numerous comic books.

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Psionic Traditions

Techniques beyond Civilization's Bounds

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by Jason Rainville

Many roads can lead to psionic mastery and each has its apologists. Civilized people believe they have the truth about psionic magic and raise grand edifices to their mastery, but they are not alone in psionic magic's use. People beyond the grand academies, sheltering in the unforgiving wilderness or in fantastical realms beyond the natural world, can learn and wield psionic power in their own ways, and they can come to their understanding through unconventional means.

Wild Psionic Power

Beyond civilization's bounds stretch untamed wilds haunted by monsters and horrors beyond description. Yet here and there, in tiny pockets, communities huddle. Some take refuge in the Underdark, while others make their homes in treetop villages. They might not have the same amenities a city can provide, but they have the same determination to survive.

The wilderness brings unusual views toward psionic power. A few, such as the drow, approach it much in the same way that civilized lands might, but they are the exception. Some, through proximity to nature, have uncovered the truth about psionic power, not seeing it as magic or even a gift but as a responsibility bestowed on worthy souls to defend reality against those who would destroy it. A few mistake psionic power as something altogether different.

This companion article to "Psionic Traditions" in Dragon 388 explores more races that wield psionic magic beyond those found in what many deem civilization. Here you can find details on those people beyond the cities and towns, read about the primitive beliefs upheld by goliaths and shifters, and explore the beautiful arts advanced by the eladrin in their shining towers. Together, both articles provide an extensive treatment on how you might fit psionic power into most races populating the D&D® world.

Drow

"You know my anger when it scorches your mind."

The drow mastered psionic magic long ago. They first encountered its like from the aberrant horrors scuttling out from the Underdark. They might be a people cursed for their wicked betrayal against their kin, the eladrin, but the world cares nothing for the petty strife between races and makes champions in good and evil alike when the Far Realm reaches beyond the borders. The drow are willing masters of psionic energy and use it to great affect against the enemies that assail them from all sides.

Strong personalities and a penchant for reckless action make drow natural candidates to become impetuous ardents. They empty their minds of all negative thought, releasing power in a corona of psionic energy that infects and twists those they face in battle. Drow ardents often command slaves and warriors, since they have the means to foil their enemies' attacks while coaxing more from those who serve them.

Deep Seer: You peer into the cyclopean depths, watchful for the secrets the darkness can reveal. You use your mind's power to seize these visions, peel them apart, and arrive at their truth. You are a mystic and seer whose accuracy not even the priestesses can deny. When did you realize you had the gift for prophecy? Do you believe it is a gift from the gods or something with which you were born? Why did you leave your people? Did you reveal an unpopular omen and were you driven out? Or did you receive a vision that spelled out a greater purpose to which you are now committed?

Associated Skills: Arcana, Insight

Mindfire

Prerequisite: Drow, any psionic class, *darkfire* power

Benefit: Your *darkfire* power gains the augmentable keyword. When you would use this power, you can spend 1 power point to target Will instead of Reflex. In addition to the normal effects from a hit, the target treats creatures more than 5 squares away from it as having total concealment until the end of your next turn.

Elf

"What you call magic, I call the world's spirit awakening."

The elves' connection to the land grants them special insight into the world's workings and an understanding of its ability to protect itself against attacks from beyond its bounds. Elves recognize psionic energy as a process of awakening, an experience known as *Sho Zol*, wherein an individual transcends the body's limitations and ascertains the world around him or her through cleared, unsullied senses.

Elves possess a keen understanding of psionic power and its purpose in the world, but it is a rare commodity among these people. Instead, elves inclined toward psionic magic find the surest path to embracing it through perfecting the body and the mind. They are not given to cloistering themselves in monasteries to learn strange fighting arts. Instead they seek out hermit masters and beseech these wise men and women to help them focus their ki and learn to channel their inner power so they can experience *Sho Zol* for themselves.

Reclusive Mystic: You have retreated from the world's distractions to contemplate existence's meaning in isolation. Your seclusion combined with your introspective scrutiny has revealed much about both yourself and your place in the larger world. Your time of seclusion is over, but what drew you forth? What was one thing you learned in your time as a hermit? What powers did you master in this time?

Associated Skills: Endurance, Nature

Psionic Accuracy

Prerequisite: Elf, *elven accuracy* racial power, any psionic class

Benefit: Your *elven accuracy* power gains the augmentable keyword. When you use this power, you can spend 1 power point to gain combat advantage against the target until the end of your next turn.

Goliath

"I don't give a damn what you call it. I call it smashing your face."

The goliaths are strangers to psionic power, or at least psionic magic in its more structured form. They have no need for contemplative pursuits, finding all the

harmony they need in the wind screaming through the peaks and in the blazing sun as it climbs above the world's edge.

Ignorance about psionic magic does not mean it doesn't exist among the goliaths. It means they confuse it for primal magic. A person who has psionic talents is believed to be possessed. A spirit shares their body and works magic through them. Even if someone explained what they were really doing, they would likely not care and continue to believe what they believe anyway.

Goliaths find great success as battleminds. They believe they walk through the spirit world—that they are somehow drawn from the dream that is life and into the vibrant reality that is dream. How else do they explain the changes to their body when they strike or the surprising effects they can achieve through simple concentration?

Spirit Possessed: A spirit entered your body while you slept, and now it won't leave. The spirit makes you see things and sense things you couldn't detect before. With it in your head, you can achieve far more than you thought possible. Is the spirit an unwelcome guest? Have you tried to exorcise it? Or are you at peace with the essence, believing yourself favored by the spirit world?

Associated Skills: Insight, Nature

Enlightened Spirit

Prerequisite: Goliath, *stone's endurance* racial power, any psionic class

Benefit: You can substitute Constitution for Strength when making Athletics checks.

In addition, when you use *stone's endurance* while you have at least 1 power point, you also gain a +2 bonus to Will until the end of your next turn.

Half-Orc

"You there. You're staring. I can make you stop if you choose to continue. I hope you continue."

Half-orcs, much like half-elves, approach psionic power as a resource. Unlike their cousins, they find its use difficult and hard to manage. Half-orcs do not often find much success in most forms of psionic magic, but those with patience and discipline can learn to harness their inner fury and release it in useful ways.

Given their heritage, many half-orcs born to human families do not linger long with their parents and might find new and interesting lives that begin when they are left on a monastery's doorstep. Such places rarely turn away orphans, for though an additional orphan means another mouth to feed, each one can work for his or her keep, and in some rare cases, learn the fighting maneuvers the monks teach.

Channeled Fury: Anger burns in your heart but you are its master, having conquered it long ago. With this focus, you can call upon its strength to see you through any hardship and help you overcome any obstacle. What is the source of this rage? How did you master it? Were you taught or did enough tragedy strike that you finally found a way to overcome it?

Associated Skills: Endurance, Intimidate

Psionic Fury

Prerequisite: Half-orc, *furious assault* racial power, any psionic class

Benefit: Your *furious assault* power gains the augmentable keyword. When you would use *furious assault*, you can spend 1 power point to deal damage to each enemy adjacent to you equal to the higher of your Strength or Dexterity modifier. This damage has the same damage type as the attack that triggered this power.

Minotaur

"I have walked the labyrinth in my dreams and have emerged awake, with a clarity I have never before known."

Minotaurs grapple with their bestial natures. Those who succumb to the lure fall into wild savagery, becoming the monsters they resemble. Those who resist can rise above the curse and find peace. Minotaurs must "walk the labyrinth" to find their true selves and, for some, psionic power facilitates this journey.

Having achieved an inner harmony through meditation and self-examination, minotaurs could emerge with unexpected ability—as if they had awakened a hidden power long dormant in themselves. Such minotaurs often become battleminds because they find the harmony between fighting excellence and their mind's power eminently compatible.

Eternal Journey: Somewhere during your quest to slay your inner beast, you became lost, unable to move back and too confused to move forward. This is a mindset, to be sure, but it has prevented you from finding a place in your community. Thus you set out to find the meaning you seek in a world that is strange and often unfriendly.

Associated Skills: Athletics, Endurance

Psionic Ferocity

Prerequisite: Minotaur, Ferocity racial trait, any psionic class

Benefit: If you have at least 1 power point when you would make a melee basic attack using your Ferocity racial trait, you can expend that power point

to deal 1[W] extra damage if it is a weapon attack or 1d8 extra damage if it isn't.

Rampaging Thought

Prerequisite: Minotaur, any psionic class

Benefit: The bonus to AC against opportunity attacks provoked from your charge attack is equal to the higher of your Constitution or Wisdom modifier.

Shifter

"One can learn much from nature, because the essential movements of fighting still come from beasts in the field and the birds in the sky."

Shifters recognize psionic power as a force in the world, but like the goliaths, most believe it is just another expression of the natural world's gifts—the primal spirits awakened in the flesh. Usually these spirits are their totemic animals, with the lion and the wolf being most common. Shifters do not often pursue psionic classes, but some find success as monks, albeit unconventional ones.

Shifters come to the monk's disciplines not through extensive training and introspection but by embracing their savage natures and calling forth the beast within them. They incorporate the lion's or wolf's hunting techniques into their strikes, so each slash from their clawed hands can open furrows in their foe's flesh. Unlike other monks who pride themselves on their focus, shifter monks are unpredictable and reckless.

Totemic Ally: An animal spirit watches over you and instructs you through the omens it leaves for you to find. How did you realize this spirit was connected to you? Did you undertake a rite of passage? Many spirits visit in dreams. Does yours? What form does it take? Think about the spirit's personality and what objectives it urges you to pursue.

Associated Skills: Insight, Nature

Enlightened Transformation

Prerequisite: Razorclaw shifter, *razorclaw shifting racial* power, any psionic class

Benefit: While under the effects of *razorclaw shifting*, you also gain a +1 bonus to Will and a +5 bonus to Insight checks.

Psychic Feast

Prerequisite: Longtooth shifter, *longtooth shifting* racial power, any psionic class

Benefit: While you benefit from *longtooth shifting* and when you hit with an attack on your turn, your regeneration increases by 2 until the end of your next turn.

Otherworldly Psionic Power

Psionic magic is thought to originate in the natural world. Those who subscribe to this way of thinking also believe psionic magic is at its strongest in the natural world, too. This is false. Psionic energy permeates all thinking creatures regardless of their plane, because the ability to wield its power stems not from one plane but from all reality when reality comes under attack.

Eladrin

"Some decry the psionic traditions, but does not Corellon teach us to seek the beauty in all things and exalt it? What better way to celebrate the mind's beauty than to explore its full capability?"

The fey, with their deep connection to arcane magic, approach the psionic traditions with skepticism and envy. They are skeptical because they have long held that arcane magic is the greatest gift Corellon has ever bestowed, yet they envy the flexibility and endless potential of psionic magic. Some eladrin have set aside the misgivings some find in psionic magic and devote their lives toward contemplating its mysteries and opening their minds to the possibilities it affords. Eladrin favor the esoteric aspects of psionic magic, having little use for the raw emotion displayed in ardents and battleminds. The orderly psion disciplines and the monk's fighting forms are more in keeping with their elevated culture.

Many enlightened eladrin learn a stylized dance called *sisthera*, roughly translated as the Sigh through the Trees on a Spring Morning, to purge themselves of negative thoughts and to exercise their bodies. One can find the dance's subtle movements in the eladrin fighting styles which use the flowing motions to circumvent their enemies' defenses and strike true each time. Some eladrin have elevated the simple dance into a fighting art that dispenses with weaponry and instead harnesses the warrior spirit and soul to bolster their kicks and strikes.

Sisthera Master: You have mastered the beautiful dance of *sisthera* and use it to clear your mind and body of all poisons while focusing your inner self to withstand the troubles you face. Who taught you the dance? Do you guard its movements from others or do you teach it to people you meet? Some eladrin experience visions when they perform *sisthera*. Have you ever experienced such a thing? What happened?

Associated Skills: Acrobatics, Insight

Dancing Thorn Style

Prerequisite: Eladrin, monk, Flurry of Blows class feature

Benefit: While wielding a longsword, you gain a +1 bonus to attack rolls using monk implement attack powers.

As well, if you wield the longsword in two hands, add +1 to the damage dealt by the power granted by your Flurry of Blows class feature.

Genasi

"There is order in chaos. You just need to know where to look."

The genasi have little experience with psionic magic and claim no notable psionic traditions through their long history. Those genasi who come to the psionic power source might learn its essential techniques from the githzerai or from masters in the natural world, but they only rarely come to its power on their own. It is not that the genasi lack the ability to use psionic magic. Quite the contrary—they have the intellectual wherewithal to make dangerous psions. Their difficulty stems from their preoccupation with the martial and arcane arts. They find these two pursuits more suited to their sensibilities than that of psionic power.

When a genasi does turn to psionic magic, it is almost always through the psion's disciplines. Genasi possess keen minds and their inherent magical nature makes opening the pathways in their consciousness easier to achieve than for other races. Genasi eschew the subtler methods employed by telepaths and favor telekinesis's destructive aspect.

Chaos Bound: You are untamed, passionate, and wild, as if you held the whole of the Elemental Chaos in your form. You are a force for destruction and you foment discord and upheaval wherever you go. Are you willful, doing as you please, consequences be damned? Or do you struggle against the impulses raging inside you?

Associated Skills: Arcana, Endurance

Elemental Recovery

Prerequisite: Genasi, any psionic class

Benefit: When you would take typed damage and you have not yet expended your racial power, you can expend 1 power point as an immediate interrupt to gain resist 5 to the triggering damage type until the start of your next turn.

At 11th level, the resistance increases to 10. At 21st level, the resistance increases to 20.

Gnome

"You're feeling very sleepy . . ."

Magic in all its forms fascinates gnomes. Although many gnomes pursue arcane spells for protection and trickery, a few turn to other techniques to achieve much the same effect. Psionic magic, or mentalism as the gnomes call it, is just another trick up the gnomes' sleeves. Gnomes see learning psionic magic as being useful for keeping big, unfriendly creatures from paying too much attention to them.

Telepathy offers the most to gnomes. It allows them to manipulate to their enemies, influence them in subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways, and ultimately blast their foes without engaging them directly. While not the most courageous approach, gnomes all agree that a win is still a win.

Cunning Hypnotist: You develop persuasive powers that you can use to beguile your subjects. It began as a simple parlor trick, but your methods have considerable use in saving your hide. Did you use any props in your performances? Are they only tricks or maybe something else? Are you self-taught or did you learn from someone else? If the latter, who was it and under what circumstances did you end the relationship?

Associated Skills: Bluff, Insight

Get in Your Head

Prerequisite: Gnome, any psionic class, *fade away* power

Benefit: Your *fade away* power gains the augmentable and teleportation keywords. When you would use *fade away*, you can spend 1 power point to also teleport 3 squares as a free action after you become invisible.

Shadar-Kai

"I deny oblivion by maintaining my resolve. Sorrow cannot touch me as long as my mind is a fortress."

Shadar-kai contend with the melancholy settling over them like a mantle. To escape its grasp, they push themselves to master complex forms, study challenging traditions, and engage in desperate activities to stimulate their bodies and minds. Shadar-kai use psionic disciplines to control the dark emotions and to steel themselves against their influence. As a result, shadar-kai favor the ordered approaches, learning their techniques in enclaves scattered through the Shadowfell.

The fighting techniques used by monks and the focus required to learn them appeals to the shadar-kai. By running through the forms, they can settle their thoughts and gird themselves against the oblivion that stalks them wherever they go. As well, they combine their innate magical abilities well with the monks' fighting styles, presenting a deadly face to all who would attack them.

Still Water: The solution to the crushing boredom afflicting your people was acceptance. You studied beneath an enlightened master who taught you to be as the still waters of an undisturbed pond. When you feel the darkness beckon, your mind calms until the dread passes by.

Associated Skills: Endurance, Insight

Darkening Mind

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, *shadow jaunt* racial power, any psionic class

Benefit: You can spend 1 power point when you use *shadow jaunt* to add 2 squares to the distance you would teleport. In addition, you remain insubstantial until the end of your next turn.

Created Psionic Magic

Psionic magic is available to any sentient creature, even those created by magic. The very idea of a revenant or warforged wielding such power is alien to many, which can catch those facing them by surprise.

Revenant

"I remember."

Revenants are not a true race, but are instead a people created from the dead. They rise from their graves to continue the work set before them much as they did in life. Revenants approach psionic magic as they did in life, and many bring forward their techniques into their new existence between life and death.

Some revenants had no psionic ability when they were alive and come into this power only as a result of their awakening. The awakening can be so traumatic that the revenant acquires new abilities as its mind's power grapples with its present reality. Psionic revenants favor traditions that do not require extensive training, since they often acquire their powers spontaneously. Revenants make fearsome battleminds.

Perfect Recollection: You awoke in death with a perfect memory of who you once were, the people you cared for, and all the little experiences that shaped your life. Do you grieve for your present state? Have you tried to resume the life you lost? How have these memories informed your choices and actions now?

Associated Skills: History, Intimidate

Death's Grasp

Prerequisite: Revenant, battlemind, *mind spike* power

Benefit: You gain the following augmentation for your *mind spike* power.

Augment 1: Each enemy adjacent to the target takes necrotic damage equal to your Constitution modifier.

Grave Flurry

Prerequisite: Revenant, monk, Flurry of Blows class feature

Benefit: Whenever you use your Flurry of Blows power, you can choose to forgo dealing damage to negate the target's resistance to necrotic damage (if any) until the end of your next turn.

Mind Rot

Prerequisite: Revenant, *dark reaping* racial power, psion

Benefit: Your *dark reaping* racial power deals necrotic and psychic damage. If you reduce the target of your *dark reaping* to 0 hit points before the end of your next turn, you regain the use of *dark reaping* and use it immediately.

Unnatural Mantle

Prerequisite: Revenant, ardent, Ardent Mantle class feature

Benefit: While you have at least 1 power point, allies within the area of your Ardent Mantle remain conscious when dropped to 0 or fewer hit points until they roll their first death saving throw.

Warforged

"I was made to fight. It is who I am. It is what I do."

Most warforged are magic constructs created to serve as soldiers in a terrible war that spanned the continent. The artificers who first created them experimented with other magic to create variations on their original models. Many were failures, but a few succeeded beyond their ambitions. The psionic warforged were one such creation.

The battlemind class offers a warforged adventurer the tools and features he or she needs to succeed. With their great durability and indefatigable will, warforged adventurers can draw from psionic reservoirs placed deep within their bodies to power devastating attacks. Many warforged battleminds adorn their carapaces with gemstones and crystals, or they inlay themselves with conductive metals to speed the power transfer.

Psiforged: You are warforged, but you are different from other members of your race. You have an unusual awareness—an ability to pick out thoughts and feelings in those around you. Do you use these experiences to gain advantage against your enemies? Or do you find that it helps you empathize with people made from flesh and bone? Who created you and for what purpose?

Associated Skills: Arcana, Insight

Psiforged Resolve

Prerequisite: Warforged, *warforged resolve* racial power, any psionic class

Benefit: When you would use this power, you can forgo the hit points you would regain to instead regain 1 power point.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed over one hundred roleplaying game titles for Dungeons & Dragons®, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire RPG*, *Star Wars RPG*, and the *d20 system*. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Player's Handbook 3*, *Martial Power 2*, and *Draconomicon 2: Metallic Dragons*. In addition, he's a regular contributor to both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives, works, and will probably die in Tennessee.

Winning Races: Minotaurs
Tangled Origins and Mysterious Clans

By Matthew Sernett
Illustration by Eric Belisle

Minotaurs present an enigma to other races. Their savage reputation builds walls around them, and their fierce action after silent contemplation or long argument seems unpredictable. Of course, the danger of Baphomet, the Horned King, also provides an element of menace. Who can say how savage a heart beats behind a minotaur's ribs?

To minotaurs, many members of other races are equivocating and murky creatures of vacillating nature. The world is black or white, right or left. Only when you do not know what option leads to your goal should you stop, consider, and discuss. If you know the way, drive ahead without ceasing!

Those who come to comprehend the perplexity of minotaur nature in general can still miss details of the subtleties of their culture. A case in point is their clans, which are as important to minotaurs as ancestry is to any dwarf. Minotaur clans differentiate themselves mainly with labyrinthine symbols. Such symbols change within a clan depending on an individual's caste, rank, and role. To further confuse the issue, minotaurs can switch clans when their philosophy better matches that of another clan. Minotaurs that change clans can marry into them as would be the case with dwarves, but current clan members can adopt others into the clan by taking them as children, parents, or siblings, too. For minotaurs, clan is as much about thought as blood.

Clan Backgrounds

Each minotaur clan is made up of a number of extended families that can all trace their ancestry to a particular individual for whom the clan is named. This person might be a great leader or a philosopher. Sometimes, clans instead become defined by their roles in a minotaur settlement and gain a different name. Either way, clans exchange members or take in individuals or families as time passes.

Each clan has its own unique symbol made up of joined lines that form a maze. Minotaurs have no problem differentiating between such symbols and easily remember them, but other races can find the distinctions confusing.

When creating your minotaur player character, consider defining your clan either by using one of the backgrounds below or developing your own. Think about your standing in the clan. Are you a person

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of importance, someone whose talent has been neglected, or perhaps an exile? Where does your clan live, and what is the settlement like? What set you on a life of adventure away from your clan's homeland? Perhaps you seek to found your own clan.

Clan Kranos

Your clan is honored to carry the name of Kranos the Uncrowned King. Kranos was a bold and unswerving hero who bowed to none. Indeed, Kranos gained infamy for his dread belt of crowns: a collection of the severed heads of leaders who sought to enslave or manipulate him.

Your tribe stems from those Kranos fathered and those who sought to serve him while he lived. Yet Kranos kicked lapdogs away from him. If others followed him and his example, so be it, but Kranos would have no one lick his hooves clean. Thus, your clan accepts only those who can stand on their own and who have the will and strength to take what they want from life. You have leaders among your clan, but they earn their role by proving they are worth following. You might already be one of these leaders, or you might be seeking to prove your worth through adventure.

Associated Skills: Athletics, Intimidate

Clan Sentune

Your clan takes its name from Sentune, a famous philosopher who emphasized exploring paths. One cannot take every option, but neither should one choose blindly. By Sentune's way of thinking, experimentation and exploration should be at the root of every minotaur's life.

Clan Sentune is thus a nomadic clan. Small groups and individuals wander separately for long periods only to gather for seasonal celebrations at spots decided upon at the previous celebration. Other minotaurs consider members of your clan permissive and idle vagabonds. In fact, many members of your clan become involved with strange gods or take up odd professions, and when the clan gathers you have the opportunity to discuss the choices individuals have made and to learn from others' successes and mistakes.

Associated Skills: Diplomacy, Streetwise

Clan Thavok

Your clan traces its history back to the founding of the Labyrinth City of Leng. Thavok chose as his battleground the confusing volcanic landscape of canyons where Leng would be built, and his victory there over a force that outnumbered his a hundredfold would make the site hallowed ground for centuries. Members of your clan defended Leng for all those many years, building and using the labyrinth of tunnels, causeways, and paths to outmaneuver foes time and time again. Eventually, doom came to Leng, and your clan was powerless to stop it because the enemy was within and knew the labyrinth as well as any in the clan.

Clan Thavok was betrayed. Wrongfully accused of treachery, your ancestors fled the city lest their blood soak the stones they had labored so long to protect. No member of your clan has looked upon the Labyrinth City's walls for generations, but it continues the old traditions. You have learned all the tricks of ambush and you possess knowledge of the hazards of dungeonscapes and tunnels.

Associated Skills: Dungeoneering, Stealth

Narrow Way Clan

You are a heretic—someone obscene and mad. Even your thoughts are dangerous and must not be heard. Any minotaur can tell this by looking at you: Your clan symbol is two unbending lines.

Your clan is outcast. It sees only one truth—one clear and narrow path. All your life, you learned that only one proper way exists and there is a right way to do everything, from waking in the morning to fetching water from the well. The labyrinth holds little meaning for your people. Why turn corners when your goal lies within sight?

Your clan has no castes and no roles or declared leader. In it, all are equal as long as they adhere to the Narrow Way. In this philosophy, your clan has one god and adheres to that power's tenets alone.

You've learned much about the weaker religions and the history of a world that does not know its path. As you head out into the world, you hope to steer others on the proper course. Of course, outside the strict life of your homeland, things get more complicated. . . .

Associated Skills: History, Religion

Scion of Leng

"My ancestor's spirit says I am a monarch and should kill you for your insolence. Shall I do as the ghost demands? Shall I wear your bones as a crown and your blood as my raiment?"

Prerequisite: Minotaur

When you trace the path of your ancestry, it inevitably leads to one place: the Labyrinth City of Leng. That mighty dominion of minotaur power destroyed itself centuries ago, becoming a tangled ruin haunted by demons, bestial minotaurs, and the mad spirits of those who slaughtered one another during the city's final convulsions.

All the evidence you've discovered leads to one inescapable truth: You are heir to the Iron Crown of Leng. Your ancestor was the last to sit upon the Blood Throne. You live today because someone of your clan fled the fall of that terrible city.

That thought alone would be a heavy burden to bear, but you hide another secret. One of your ancestors is with you—in spirit at least. You hear his gruff voice goading you to conquer and to let your enemies' blood fall to the ground. The ancestor also incessantly demands that you seek out the lost Iron Crown. Sometimes you see his furious eyes glaring from beneath his horned brow.

You think you have only one way to be rid of him: You must find the crown, work your way to the heart of the Labyrinth City, and enthrone yourself as Lord of Leng. But maybe no spirit exists. Maybe the ghost is a symptom of a madness you inherited from the rulers of the past. Perhaps, like the Labyrinth City, you are doomed to demented savagery, haunted by dreams of the past.

Scion of Leng Path Features

Ancestor's Warning (11th level): You gain a +2 bonus to initiative, Insight, and Perception checks.

Madness of Leng (11th level): When you spend an action point to take an extra action, enemies within 2 squares of you make a melee basic attack as a free action against one of their allies, chosen randomly.

Relentless Bloodlust (16th level): When a bloodied enemy adjacent to you shifts, you can shift into the square the enemy left as an immediate reaction.

Blood Fugue — Scion of Leng Attack 11

As the ghost of your ancestor enters your body, a crimson veil falls before your vision. Your actions become those of the beast within you.

Encounter
Standard Action **Melee** 1
Effect: You shift your speed.
Target: Each enemy you move adjacent to while shifting
Attack: Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity + 6 (8 at 21st level) vs. AC
Hit: 1d6 + Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier damage, and you knock the target prone.
Effect: After shifting and making this power's attacks, you are stunned until the start of your next turn.

Enthroned in Blood — Scion of Leng Utility 12

The mingled blood that runs down your body gives you strength to continue the slaughter.

Daily ✦ Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the stance ends, you gain a +2 power bonus to attack bloodied targets, and if an enemy becomes bloodied while adjacent to you, you can spend a healing surge as a free action.

Lost in the Labyrinth City — Scion of Leng Attack 20

You stamp a cloven hoof and mysterious pathways open in the universe, drawing your foe to distant and terrible Leng.

Daily ✦ Fear, Psychic, Teleportation
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity + 6 (8 at 21st level) vs. Will
Hit: The target is banished to the Labyrinth City of Leng and takes ongoing 15 psychic damage (save ends both). While banished, the target disappears, cannot take actions, and cannot be targeted. On a save, the target reappears in the space it last occupied. If that space is occupied, the target returns to the nearest unoccupied space of its choice. You can expel the target from Leng as a free action, in which case it appears as described above.
Aftereffect: The target is dazed until the end of its next turn.
Miss: 2d10 + Strength, Constitution, or Dexterity modifier psychic damage, and you slide the target 3 squares.

About the Author

Matthew Sernett is a writer and game designer for Wizards of the Coast who splits his time between Dungeons & Dragons and Magic: The Gathering. Recent credits include *Player's Handbook Races: Tieflings*, *The Plane Above: Secrets of the Astral Sea*, and *Magic the Gathering: Zendikar*. When he's not making monsters or building worlds, he's watching bad fantasy movies you don't realize exist and shouldn't bother to learn about.

Character Concepts: Corrupted Characters

By Matthew Sernett
Illustration by Eric Belisle

Ambitious beings will always strive for greatness. Great glory, great virtue, great honor, but great tragedy, great avarice, and great evil, too. The difficulty in dealing with intelligent, free-willed creatures is figuring out what kind of greatness they are going to achieve. So often, they don't know themselves, or they discover the answer too late.

—Sarpenon, the Lily Marquis of the Court of Stars

All of the preeminent races of the world pride themselves on their unique qualities and virtues, whether they are strength, adaptability, perseverance, oneness with nature, spiritual insight, or an urge to explore. Virtue, however, is the reverse face of vice, and what makes a character strong in pursuit of virtue can be equally strong when it is drawn to vice. What happens when a character is drawn toward a path of vileness and depravity or stubbornly sets himself on a dark course?

Every good has its commensurate evil. Decisiveness can become rashness. Piety can be in devotion to evil powers as easily as good. Adventurers face and fall prey to temptations in innumerable ways. They succumb to their own ambitions, hunger for knowledge that is better left unknown, and see opportunity when all they should see is adversity. Shadowy forces entice them with promises of power, but also security, safety, beauty, wealth, happiness—all the things that creatures everywhere seek but with a dark tinge and via a dark road.

Those who falter on the righteous path or stumble down a murky way might gain special insight or power. Your player character might be such a one—if you're willing to face the consequences.

Playing a Corrupted Character

If you want to play a character with a dark past, consider some of the game elements presented in this

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article. When you roleplay your corrupted character, you need to decide whether your tie to evil forces lies in the past or if it's a current temptation.

Have you done something you'd rather forget, or were you forced into a vile alliance? Do you harbor secret dreams for which you made a special bargain? Are you ignorant of the danger into which you've put yourself?

Perhaps in the city-state of your birth, everyone honors Bane. Maybe worshipers of Vecna are helping you keep a terrible family secret. Perhaps you're obsessed with a particular political role, and surely a few quiet prayers to Lolth couldn't hurt.

Whatever the source of your corruption, it's incumbent upon you to roleplay it in a way that adds to the other players' entertainment rather than causing friction and arguments at the table. "But that's what my character would do" is no excuse for casting a pall over the game. Instead, use your character's dark past to give him or her a failing to overcome or a secret to hide.

Sibilant Whispers

Zehir's cultists constantly seek new converts for their slithering god. Their secret coteries tempt with promises of the death of enemies, delights hidden by the darkness of night, and the patronage and protection of powerful yuan-ti. Yet where temptation fails, force often prevails. Blackmail and threats often win converts, and after one's tongue gets cut in twain, what use is it to resist? No one trusts a hissing voice when it denies association with snakes.

Choosing the feat or skill power below signifies your association with Zehir's cultists. Have you escaped the snake pit, or are you still wrapped in yuan-ti coils?

Serpent's Tongue — **Bluff Utility 2**

Your lie twists in your foe's mind like a snake, allowing you to hide the venom behind your next words.

Encounter
Free Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You fail a Bluff check against a creature
Effect: You gain a +5 power bonus to the next Bluff, Diplomacy, or Intimidate check you make against that creature before the end of your next turn.

Snake Blooded

Benefit: You gain resist 5 poison. In addition, you gain a +2 feat bonus to saving throws against poison effects.

Dangerous Thoughts

Few creatures provoke as much fear and revulsion as mind flayers. Their strange powers and vile appetites have earned them their dangerous reputation. Yet illithids do not slay all whom they meet. Many become their thralls, bound in thought and action by psychic power. Others serve them without magical compulsion, but they are no less slaves because of it.

By choosing one of the feats below, you reveal your character's past as the servant of the illithid threat. What horrible actions did you perform that you keep reminding yourself you couldn't stop? How many victims did you deliver into their clutches to protect the ones you loved? Can you still hear their thoughts in your head?

Far Thought

Benefit: Once per day, you can use telepathy for 5 minutes. You can communicate with any creature within 5 squares of you that has a language and that you can see. This telepathy allows for two-way communication.

Foreign Memories

Benefit: You gain a +5 feat bonus to Arcana, Insight, History, and Dungeoneering checks as they relate to aberrant creatures or their works.

Sturdy Mind

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to saving throws against charm, illusion, and psychic effects.

Evil Secrets

The jealous minds of Vecna's followers keep secrets even from each other. Who can say who is part of the conspiracy or how much they know? In such an environment, it's natural to grow paranoid. It's better not to trust.

Did you escape the net of lies and secrets woven about you? Are you sure? Do you need the Vecnites to keep one of your secrets? Is there knowledge they possess that you desire? Have they taken a memory from your mind—one you hope never to remember? Choose one of the game elements below if you dare to become entangled with the Whispered One.

Secrets of the City — **Streetwise Utility 2**

You learn all the city's secrets by keeping your ear to the streets.

At-Will
Free Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You would make an Arcana, History, Intelligence, or Religion check in a settlement in which you've already succeeded on a Streetwise check
Effect: You make a Streetwise check in place of the Arcana, History, Intelligence, or Religion check.

Damning Secret Insight Utility 2

Picking up on tiny tell-tale signs, you divine a critical weakness in your foe's determination.

Encounter
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Trigger: You would make an Intimidate check against a target
Target: One creature that shares a language with you
Effect: You make an Insight check in place of an Intimidate check. The target gains the standard bonuses to its Will defense against Intimidate (+5 bonus if the target is unfriendly to the character, or +10 if the target is hostile).

DARK AMBITIONS

Ambition is all too common among mankind, but sometimes aspirations, talent, and industriousness are not enough. Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you fail. Sometimes you need a little help. And sometimes, you need to cause your rivals to make room for your rise.

Lolth catches more than drow in her web. Any who seek greatness for themselves or who use conspiracy and slander to fell foes dangle from her strands like puppets. Those who pray to her for inspiration need not share her hatred of elves, but it helps.

Somehow you ended up in Lolth's service. Did you worship her to pursue your own ambitions, or were you swept up in the lofty dreams of another? Was it worth it? Did you bow before drow during your schemes or employ them toward your ends? Did you have an elf or eladrin as a rival? Think about these questions as you pick one of the skill powers below.

Note that the skill use in *faulty memory* is not mind control, so a target is not likely to believe something that plainly can't be true, only things that might have been true but misremembered. For example, you can't convince a wizard that you apprenticed with her when she never takes students or when she's had only three. The length of time that the target believes your version of events depends upon what evidence the target encounters that is to the contrary. If you convince a guard you are a childhood friend but then can't name the town where he or she grew up, the lie won't hold.

Faulty Memory Bluff Utility 6

You spin a web of lies that makes someone doubt his or her own recollection.

Encounter
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature that shares a language with you
Effect: You make a Bluff check opposed by an Insight check that the target makes as a free action. The target gains a +5 bonus to Insight if the target is unfriendly to the character, or a +10 bonus if the target is hostile. If your check succeeds, you make the target doubt its memory and believe your version of events.

About the Author

Matthew Sernett is a writer and game designer for Wizards of the Coast who splits his time between Dungeons & Dragons and Magic: The Gathering. Recent credits include *Player's Handbook Races: Tieflings*, *The Plane Above: Secrets of the Astral Sea*, and *Magic the Gathering: Zendikar*. When he's not making monsters or building worlds, he's watching bad fantasy movies you don't realize exist and shouldn't bother to learn about.

Class Acts: Monk
Fallen Needle Itinerants

By Peter Schaefer
Illustration by Slawomir Maniak

Not every person who spends time in spiritual contemplation has the leisure or fortune to study the nature of the universe in peace at a monastery. Those who travel the road frequently—or end up in danger constantly—might integrate the Fallen Needle practice into their fighting styles. Fallen Needle consists of a series of techniques that help a monk develop blinding-fast reactions that many claim are swifter than the bounce of a fallen needle.

Any monks who have need of the Fallen Needle techniques can learn them while on the road if they encounter one who can train them. The philosophy of freely teaching those in need originates with the founder of the style, Fat Aloisus. Aloisus, who has earned his epithet honestly, is a wandering monk, herbalist, cartographer, teacher, and chef. He never passes up an opportunity to explore or learn something new, and he never turns down a chance to share what he knows with those who ask.

Fat Aloisus never travels without a store of drawn maps, ink and pens, and blank vellum, and he is happy to copy his maps for no more than the cost of materials. He has maps of every place he has traveled and some of far off lands such as Silverymoon and Urnst. However, he is far happier when discussing his true passion: the art of the feast. Aloisus adores cooking for others and surprising them with the gourmet meals one can make from mean materials while on the road.

For all his weight and joviality, Aloisus surprises all with his swift movement. Because he travels alone, he frequently faces bandits who have not learned of his reputation. He puts them off guard with his appearance, then startles them with his ability to evade their attacks and move swiftly about the battlefield.

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New Monk Powers

Monks can learn the following powers as they travel the roads and make their way through the world.

Level 1 At-Will Discipline

Fallen Needle — Monk Attack 1

A single, sharp blow readies you to step away at a moment's notice.

At-Will ✦ Full Discipline, Implement, Psionic
Attack Technique
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d10 + Dexterity modifier damage, and the target takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls against you until the end of your next turn.
Movement Technique
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift 1 square or move 3 squares.

Level 1 Encounter Discipline

Gentle Rainfall — Monk Attack 1

You strike many foes, then evade strikes faster than they thought possible.

Encounter ✦ Full Discipline, Implement, Psionic
Attack Technique
Standard Action **Close** burst 1
Target: Each enemy you can see in burst
Attack: Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d10 + Dexterity modifier damage.
Effect: You shift 1 square for each creature you hit.
Movement Technique
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift 1 square or move 3 squares.

Level 3 Encounter Discipline

Fallen Hammer in Repose — Monk Attack 3

You collide bodily with your foe, then rebound to safety. Though you appear out of control, you land balanced and ready.

Encounter ✦ Full Discipline, Implement, Psionic
Attack Technique
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d10 + Dexterity modifier damage, and you push the target 3 squares.
Movement Technique
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift 1 square or move 3 squares.

Level 7 Encounter Discipline

Two Falling Feathers — Monk Attack 7

Your strikes bemuse your opponent, allowing you to move it with the lightest touch.

Encounter ✦ Full Discipline, Implement, Psionic
Attack Technique
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d10 + Dexterity modifier damage, and you slide the target up to 3 squares to any square adjacent to you.
Movement Technique
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift 1 square or move 3 squares.

Level 13 Encounter Discipline

Torrent of Falling Knives — Monk Attack 13

Your fingertips pierce steel and flesh effortlessly but come away clean, as you dance among your foes.

Encounter ✦ Full Discipline, Implement, Psionic
Attack Technique
Standard Action **Melee** 1
Effect: You shift your speed.
Target: One, two, or three enemies adjacent to you during your movement
Attack: Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + Dexterity modifier damage.
Movement Technique
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift 1 square or move 3 squares.

Level 17 Encounter Discipline

Fall of the Anvil's Master — Monk Attack 17

You strike an enemy with all four limbs, and each blow lands with the weight of an anvil. Once done, you land lightly.

Encounter ✦ Full Discipline, Implement, Psionic
Attack Technique
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity vs. Fortitude
Hit: 3d10 + Dexterity modifier damage. You push the target 3 squares and knock the target prone.
Movement Technique
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift 1 square or move 3 squares.

Level 27 Encounter Discipline

Storms Fall without Warning Monk Attack 27

You step through thin air to unleash a storm of fingertip strikes on your enemies, doubling them over with phantom pain.

Encounter ✦ Full Discipline, Implement, Psionic, Psychic, Teleportation
Attack Technique
Standard Action **Close** burst 1
Effect: You teleport your speed.
Target: Each enemy in burst
Attack: Dexterity vs. Will
Hit: 3d12 + Dexterity modifier psychic damage.
Movement Technique
Move Action **Personal**
Effect: You teleport up to half your speed.

New Paragon Path

Falling Needle Itinerant

"Travel swiftly as you must, but fight as fluidly as you can."

Prerequisite: Monk

Fat Aloisus teaches any he meets who have the skill and the will to learn. In like manner, those he teaches are instructed to pass on his training to those whom they meet. Whether they wander for love of maps and food, a search for truth, a lust for treasure or adventure, or a noble quest, their wandering is aided by the lessons they learn from other travelers.

As a student of the Falling Needle practice and an itinerant, your techniques aid you—typically when others decide to attack you. You move swiftly on the road and in the heat of combat. You might be struck, but you do not remain in place for a second blow.

Falling Needle Itinerant Path Features

Falling Needle Training (11th level): When you use a monk power or monk paragon path power to shift, you shift 1 additional square.

Itinerant Action (11th level): When an attack hits you, you can spend an action point as an immediate interrupt to gain a +4 bonus to all defenses until the end of your next turn.

Path of the Itinerant Monk (11th level): You gain a +2 bonus to Endurance checks. In addition, when you are traveling in a group of eight or fewer, increase that group's overland speed by 10 miles per day.

Falling Needle Mastery (16th level): You gain a +1 bonus to AC and Reflex.

Falling Needle Itinerant Disciplines

Fallen from the Thread Falling Needle Itinerant Attack 11

You pass right through your enemies' grasp, even when one has you held.

Encounter ✦ Full Discipline, Implement, Psionic
Attack Technique
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Effect: Before or after the attack, you shift your speed. You can shift through enemies' spaces during this movement.
Target: One or two creatures
Attack: Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + Dexterity modifier damage.
Movement Technique
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: If any creature is grabbing you, you automatically end that grab and then shift 1 square.

Wind-Blown Pine Falling Needle Itinerant Utility 12

As a wind through the boughs of a tree, you flow through your enemies.

Encounter ✦ Psionic
Move Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift twice your speed. You can shift through enemies' spaces during this movement.

Threading the Eye Falling Needle Itinerant Attack 20

Your gentle extension of a single finger nevertheless passes easily through flesh and bone.

Daily ✦ Implement, Psionic
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity + 4 vs. Reflex
Hit: 4d10 + Dexterity modifier damage.
Effect: Until the end of the turn, you can use the movement technique from any at-will or encounter monk power you know, even if it is expended. Doing so does not expend that movement technique if it has not already been expended.

About the Author

Peter Schaefer is an itinerant of sorts. He refuses to sleep in the same place more than once. He never takes the same route to work more than once. And he will not work as an RPG developer on such projects as *Adventurer's Vault 2*, *The Plane Below*, *Player's Handbook 3*, and numerous *D&D Insider* articles in the same spot more than once. This last habit really bothers the folk who must help him move his desk every morning.

Class Acts: Seeker
Savage Archers

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by Slawomir Maniak and David Rapoza

The forest held few secrets from Ander as he moved from shadow to shadow, flitting from tree to tree. His keen eyes scoured the tangled floor for his prey's trail. This was no ordinary beast Ander hunted, no bear or stag as he was accustomed; no, it was an abomination—a thing that should not be. Ander knew not how it came to be in these lands or what kind of hell spawned it, but he had a duty to put it down before its corruption could spread. Ander could see its influence in the spotted leaves, in the browned grass, and in the dead creatures twitching in slimy pools. Ander would kill it this day, but he was not foolish enough to face it directly. It didn't deserve such a consideration. It would die by the arrow he fired swift and sure, and it would be done.

Ander drew an arrow from the leather quiver on his back. The arrow was an uncanny thing, cut from Tall Friend's heartwood, a mighty oak whose spreading branches had sheltered the land for a thousand years. Engraved runes shined with emerald light along the shaft's length, each a promise sworn to Gob, the willful spirit whose power Ander borrowed. Each arrowhead was bone Ander had harvested from a mighty bear he had slain long ago, and in its barbed tip he could feel the bear's powerful spirit still, its roar causing the head to tremble. Notching the arrow and raising the bow, he advanced. It was time to bring this hunt to its end.

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Of all the weapons available to seekers, the bow is the most popular. It has range and power, making it perfect for launching evocations into the middle of the seeker's foes without facing the enemies' reprisals. For many seekers, the bow is a means to an end—a tool and nothing more. But for a rare few, the bow is more than a piece of wood and string. It is an extension of the self invested with the mingled spirits of seeker and the primal entities to whom he or she is bound.

The savage archer, as some are called, demonstrates talents through the arrows' odd movements and his or her surprising control over projectiles even after being loosed from bows. The evocations described in *Player's Handbook 3* scratch the surface for what a seeker with a bow can achieve. The truly dedicated can have greater power than ever before thought possible.

New Evocations

When a savage archer uses primal magic to guide his or her arrows, the spirit allies manifest in its path, giving all a glimpse into the vibrant and strange spirit world. Writhing spirits in beast, humanoid, or other, stranger forms, appear and just as quickly vanish when the projectile slams home. Seekers with the following powers have even more options for making sure no arrow is wasted.

Level 1 Encounter Evocation

Steel Forest — Seeker Attack 1

The arrows you loose in quick succession fall among your enemies. If they strike the earth, the ground sprouts jagged barbs.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Area** burst 1 within weapon range
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Target: Each creature in burst
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] damage.
Effect: Each unoccupied square in the burst fills with jagged barbs until the start of your next turn. These squares are difficult terrain, and a creature that enters one of these squares without shifting takes damage equal to your Wisdom modifier.

Level 1 Daily Evocation

Persistent Arrow — Seeker Attack 1

After punching through your target, the missile halts in the air, frozen until you command it to fly once more.

Daily ✦ Conjuration, Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Primary Target: One creature
Primary Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Wisdom modifier damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: You conjure a persistent arrow in one unoccupied square adjacent to the target. The arrow remains until the end of the encounter or until expended. Any creature that enters a persistent arrow's square takes damage equal to your Wisdom modifier. You can expend the arrow by making the following attack using the persistent arrow's square as the origin square for the attack.
Minor Action **Ranged** 5
Secondary Target: One creature
Secondary Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] damage, and you knock the target prone.

Level 2 Utility Evocation

Warding Arrow — Seeker Utility 2

Your fired arrow speeds back to intercept your enemy's attack.

Encounter ✦ Primal
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Trigger: You would be hit by a melee attack
Effect: You gain a +2 bonus to all defenses until the start of your next turn. If the triggering attack still hit you, the triggering attacker grants combat advantage to you until the start of your next turn.

Level 3 Encounter Evocation

Seeker's Due — Seeker Attack 3

You draw and fire, exulting in your attack's simplicity.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Wisdom modifier damage.
Bloodbond: This attack deals extra damage equal to your Dexterity modifier.
Miss: You gain a +2 power bonus to attack rolls using ranged basic attacks until the end of your next turn.

Level 5 Daily Evocation

Cursed Dart — Seeker Attack 5

You whisper a terrible curse as you nock the arrow. When you release it, you speed death and despair to your enemy.

Daily ✦ Primal, Psychic, Weapon, Zone
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Wisdom modifier damage plus 1d10 psychic damage.
Effect: The attack creates a zone in a burst 1 centered on the target (save ends). The zone moves with the target. Any enemy other than the target that starts its turn within the zone takes 5 psychic damage and becomes immobilized until the start of its next turn.

Level 6 Utility Evocation

Swirling Arrows — Seeker Utility 6

Although the shot goes wide, the spirit lurking in the arrow refuses to surrender and flies off again to find a target.

Encounter ✦ Primal
Free Action **Personal**
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Trigger: You miss with the ranged basic attack granted by *inevitable shot*
Effect: You regain *inevitable shot* and you use it immediately.

Level 10 Utility Evocation

Far Step Arrow — Seeker Utility 10

Your enemy's blood marks your path, letting you bridge the distance with primal power.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Teleportation
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You drop a nonminion enemy to 0 hit points with an attack
Effect: You teleport to an unoccupied square adjacent to the triggering enemy.

Level 13 Encounter Evocation

Cordon of Thorns — Seeker Attack 13

The arrow you loosed explodes into tiny thorns that hang suspended around your enemies, promising pain to any who dares pass through them.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Weapon, Zone
Standard Action **Area** burst 1 within weapon range
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Primary Target: Each creature in burst
Primary Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + 1d6 + Wisdom modifier damage.
Effect: The three squares of the burst which are farthest from you become a zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. While the zone remains, you can make the following attack using a square within the zone as the origin square.
Opportunity Action **Melee** 1
Trigger: A creature enters the zone
Secondary Target: The triggering creature
Secondary Attack: Wisdom vs. Fortitude
Hit: 1d6 damage, and the target is slowed until the end of its next turn.

Level 15 Daily Evocation

Arrows of Misfortune — Seeker Attack 15

Your projectiles blacken in midflight, assuming a sinister cast that hints at the doom awaiting those struck by them.

Daily ✦ Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Primary Target: One or two creatures
Primary Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Wisdom modifier damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: You conjure an arrow of misfortune in an unoccupied square adjacent to each target. Each arrow remains until the end of the encounter or until expended. Any creature that enters an arrow of misfortune's square takes damage equal to your Wisdom modifier. You can expend an arrow of misfortune by making the following attack using the arrow of misfortune's square as the origin square for the attack.
Minor Action **Ranged** 5
Secondary Target: One creature
Secondary Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] damage, and the target takes a -2 penalty to all defenses and attack rolls (save ends).

Level 17 Encounter Evocation

Seeker's Peerless Shot — Seeker Attack 17

You send two missiles at the enemy, confident in the spirit's power to guide them true.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Target: One or two creatures
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + 1d8 + Wisdom modifier damage.
Bloodbond: This attack deals extra damage equal to your Dexterity modifier.
Miss: Make a ranged basic attack against any enemy within 5 squares of the creature you missed, using any square in the missed creature's space for the attack's origin square.

Level 19 Daily Evocation

Black Arrow of Fate — Seeker Attack 19

You draw a special arrow, inscribed with bitter oaths, and launch it at your prey. Where it falls, anguish follows.

Daily ✦ Primal, Psychic, Weapon, Zone
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 3[W] + Wisdom modifier damage plus 1d10 psychic damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: The attack creates a zone in a burst 2 centered on the target's space (save ends). The zone moves with the target, remaining centered on its space. Any enemy other than the target that starts its turn within the zone takes 5 psychic damage and is dazed until the start of its next turn.

Level 22 Utility Evocation

Seeking Arrow — Seeker Utility 22

You whisper to the spirit housed in your arrow, calling it to seek out and destroy your foe.

Daily ✦ Primal, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Effect: You enter the seeking arrow stance. Until this stance ends, you regain the use of *inevitable shot* at the start of each of your turns.

Level 29 Daily Evocation

Biting Wind Arrows — Seeker Attack 29

One after another, your arrows fly toward your targets, but hit or miss, the arrows remain awaiting your command to strike again.

Daily ✦ Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a bow.
Primary Target: One, two, or three targets
Primary Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Wisdom modifier damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: You conjure a biting wind arrow in an unoccupied square adjacent to each target. Each arrow remains until the end of the encounter or until expended. Any creature that enters a biting wind arrow's square takes damage equal to your Wisdom modifier. You can expend an arrow by making the following attack using the biting wind arrow as the origin square for the attack.
Minor Action **Ranged** 20
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] modifier damage, you knock the target prone, and the target takes a -2 penalty to all defenses and attack rolls (save ends).

New Magic Items

Seekers benefit from using many magic bows, but certain kinds speak to their unique talents.

Bow of True Arrows — Level 5+

Enemies shelter their companions at their own peril against archers wielding this compound bow.

Lvl 5	+1	1,000 gp	Lvl 20	+4	125,000 gp
Lvl 10	+2	5,000 gp	Lvl 25	+5	625,000 gp
Lvl 15	+3	25,000 gp	Lvl 30	+6	3,125,000 gp

Weapon: Bow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d8 damage per plus
Property: While using this bow, whenever you miss an enemy that benefits from cover granted by its allies with an encounter or daily ranged attack power, each enemy granting your target cover takes damage equal to the bow's enhancement bonus.

Foe-Seeking Bow — Level 3+

You feel the bow's hate for cowardly and furtive opponents.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Weapon: Bow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus, or +1d10 damage per plus against targets granting combat advantage
Power (Daily): Free Action. *Trigger:* You would use this bow to make an attack against an enemy benefiting from any concealment or cover. *Effect:* The enemy loses concealment or cover and grants combat advantage to you for the triggering attack.

Inevitable Bow — Level 12+

Arrows loosed from this bow have a way of finding their targets.

Lvl 12	+3	13,000 gp	Lvl 22	+5	325,000 gp
Lvl 17	+4	65,000 gp	Lvl 27	+6	1,625,000 gp

Weapon: Bow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus, or +1d10 damage per plus with basic attacks
Power (Daily): Free Action. *Trigger:* You miss with a ranged attack. *Effect:* Make a ranged basic attack against a different enemy using the primary target's space as the origin square.

Retributive Bow — Level 13+

If you come under attack, this rune-inscribed bow speeds you to safety and looses painful retribution.

Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Weapon: Bow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d8 damage per plus
Power (Daily • Teleportation): Immediate Reaction. *Trigger:* An enemy hits you with a melee attack. *Effect:* You teleport 5 squares and make a ranged basic attack against the triggering enemy.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed over one hundred roleplaying game titles for Dungeons & Dragons®, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire RPG*, *Star Wars RPG*, and the *d20 system*. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Player's Handbook 3*, *Martial Power 2*, and *Draconomicon 2: Metallic Dragons* and in the pages of both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives in Tennessee.

Class Acts: Druid
Expanding Horizons

By Anthony Harrison with Jeff Morgenroth
Illustration by Devon Cady-Lee

Members of the Coven of the Garden maintain a unique relationship with the primal spirits and also with the world. Although the coven originally worked through secretive methods in a well-hidden garden in the depths of the woods, it recently relocated its esoteric culture so that it could take root in the heart of civilization. This migration created opportunities to further their myriad goals, including establishing harmony with nature wherever they can within the world's points of light. They hope to accomplish this, in part, by accumulating and sharing knowledge and personal experience. When imparting knowledge in this manner, they also hope to strengthen their primal spark to live on among the primal spirits.

Members of the coven strive to remain in a state of constant communion with the spirits. As a result of this ongoing contact, primal spirits can utilize coven members to maintain and guard certain crossings into the Feywild and Shadowfell, and each coven member can serve as a focal point of primal power. In the latter case, spirits venture into realms where their power is weak, explore them by drawing strength from the coven members serving as focal points, and then, over time, establish a firm and lasting presence.

Coven of the Garden Factions

The coven is divided into three factions: the Inner Garden, the Anemochory, and the Outer Garden. All members of the coven receive training in another class, though each aspect has a different leaning in this regard. The following sections delve more deeply into each of the Primal Aspects and their roles and describe the powers associated with them.

The Inner Garden: Members of this faction are charged with tending the main groves and crossings. In addition, each member in the Inner Garden sustains direct communion with the primal spirits. This faction has mainly guardian druids.

The Anemochory: Those in this faction venture into various realms with the primal spirits. They also travel the world to found new groves and gain new members to join the cause; the Primal Predator is drawn to this faction.

The Outer Garden: Those serving the Outer Garden join various aspects of civilization, such as the church or military, to further the coven's

knowledge and local influence. This faction also includes new members who recently came into the fold. The Outer Garden functions solely on a small scale. This direct interaction with the masses appeals greatly to Primal Swarm druids. However, as the most diverse faction, the Outer Garden has a fair representation of other druids, too.

Like other druid powers, the powers which follow are available to any druids regardless of their primal aspect. They tend to be more suited to one than to others, however, and that is how they're organized here.

Primal Guardian

Primal Guardians are drawn to the leader role; they take charge of situations and ultimately hold themselves responsible for the well-being of the world around them. This aspect, being steadfast and resolute, prefers the primal spirits of the earth and forests, which coincide with their natures. They are grounded in a visceral ideology, and each member is charged with nurturing his or her primal spark into a controlled blaze. By keeping the primal flame of others going strong, they seek to illuminate the world and, upon passing, join the other primal spirits. Guardians normally identify mostly with shamans who manifest the primal spirits more directly, though clerics of Ioun, Erathis, and Melora have much common ground as well.

Blood Frenzy Howl — Druid Utility 6

Observing your allies' ferocity, you let lose a long howl. Your ululation awakens dormant primal spirits to invigorate your allies.

Encounter ✦ Beast Form, Primal
Immediate Reaction **Close** burst 10
Trigger: An ally in burst scores a critical hit
Target: Each ally in burst
Effect: Each target gains temporary hit points equal to 5 + your Constitution modifier.

Serpent's Hold — Druid Attack 7

You slither toward your foe, springing forth to entangle it in a mass of coils.

Encounter ✦ Beast Form, Implement, Primal
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Effect: Before the attack, you shift 2 squares.
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d8 + Wisdom modifier damage, and you grab the target.
Primal Guardian: Until the grab ends and while you remain in beast form, the target grants combat advantage to your allies.
Sustain Move: While in beast form, you sustain the grab and can pull the target at half your speed without making a Strength attack.

Form of the Night Owl — Druid Attack 19

Your flesh flakes into feathers as you assume the form of an owl, and each beat of your wings stirs life into the winds. The power of this gale later calms to soothe the injured.

Daily ✦ Healing, Implement, Polymorph, Primal
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Use your wild shape to assume the form of a Large owl until the end of the encounter or until you use the *wild shape* power again. While you are in this form, you gain a flight speed equal to your speed (you must land at the end of your movement) and a +5 power bonus to Perception checks.

Before the end of the encounter, make the following attack once, if you are in this form.

Standard Action **Melee** touch
Effect: You shift your speed. At any point during this movement, make the following attack once.
Target: One creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d12 + Wisdom modifier damage, and the target is slowed.
Effect: The first ally to make a successful attack against the target before the end of your next turn regains hit points equal to 5 + your Constitution modifier.

Primal Predator

Being tasked with traveling into the depths of the Feywild and Shadowfell has given the primal predator a strong striker leaning. Some have gone so far as to offer a part of their soul to the Shadowfell, embracing the darkness to better carry out their duties. The avenger, assassin, and monk are all solid choices for a multiclass/hybrid predator druid. Their love for nature is strong, which makes reverence and worship fitting terms when describing how they view nature and harmony. In terms of primal spirits, the Primal Predator feels drawn toward the primal spirits of animals, with a special focus on hunters or creatures of strength, speed, and guile.

Slashing Dash — Druid Attack 17

Invoking the cheetah's speed, you dash across the battlefield to rend your foes. Your bloody assault awakens primal instincts, invigorating you.

Encounter ✦ Beast Form, Implement, Primal
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Target: One, two, or three creatures
Effect: You shift 2 squares between each attack.
Attack: Wisdom vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + Wisdom modifier damage. If all three attacks hit, you can spend a healing surge.

Primal Beast Apotheosis — Druid Utility 22

Shadowy fur and feathers cover your fluxing form. Your claws are sharper than any metal and your maw is that of a thousand daggers. The beat of your wings is the death knell of a long-forgotten god.

Daily ✦ Beast Form, Primal
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the form of the Primal Beast until the end of the encounter or until you use the *wild shape* power again. While you are in this form, you gain one of the following attributes until the end of the encounter.
- ✦ You gain a fly speed (hover) equal to your speed.
- ✦ You can reroll any damage die that has a result of 1 or 2.
- ✦ You can ignore difficult terrain, and your malleable form allows you to move full speed when squeezing.
- ✦ Enemies within 2 squares of you take a –2 penalty to all defenses.

PRIMAL SWARM

The primal spirits that appeal most to the swarm druid are the subtle, oft-overlooked ones, such as those of the hive or the lichen. The Primal Swarm druids' attention to the little things and their inner harmony enables them to be in hundreds of places at once. To be among the masses, feeling the resonant pulse of their primal spark, grants an inner joy that makes swarm druids ideal members of the Outer Garden. This same attention to minutiae also makes them superb controllers. By seeing the situation from any of the thousands of angles their fragmented consciousness provides, their tactics and comprehension are unparalleled. The force of the swarm resembles the force of nature itself—masses flowing akin to the tides. The invoker is a natural multiclass/hybrid choice to expand on this theme.

Infesting Strike — Druid Attack 15

Your swarm bursts outward, leaving enemies' wounds infested by your writhing masses. Imbued with a dim essence of the Primal Beast, they become aggressive, leaping from foe to foe.

Daily ✦ Beast Form, Implement, Primal
Standard Action **Close** burst 1
Target: Each enemy in burst
Attack: Wisdom vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d6 + Wisdom modifier damage. Your swarm infects the target (save ends). Enemies that begin their turn infected, or that are adjacent to an infected enemy, take 5 damage. Adjacent enemies become infected upon taking damage (save ends).
Aftereffect: The target and enemies adjacent to the target are slowed (save ends).
Miss: Half damage, and the target is slowed until the end of your next turn.

Infiltrating Drone — Druid Attack 17

You fiercely blast out at your foes in a torrent of attacks, which disguises special beasts that crawl into your opponent's ear and place that opponent under your control.

Encounter ✦ Beast Form, Charm, Implement, Primal
Standard Action **Close** blast 3
Primary Target: Each creature in blast
Primary Attack: Wisdom vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d6 + Wisdom modifier damage.
Effect: Make a secondary attack.
Secondary Target: One creature in blast
Secondary Attack: Wisdom vs. Fortitude
Hit: The secondary target is dominated until the end of your next turn.

Swarming Bulwark — Druid Attack 19

Your swarm expands in a burst of fury. The sky momentarily blackens as you partition yourself in two, forming a living wall.

Daily ✦ Beast Form, Implement, Primal
Standard Action **Area** wall 8 within 10 squares
Effect: You split part of your swarm into a living wall. The wall can be up to 5 squares high and lasts until the end of your next turn. The wall provides cover to those on the other side and counts as difficult terrain. Any creature that enters the wall takes 1d12 damage. Any creature that starts its turn in the wall takes 2d6 damage.
Any creature that enters the wall or starts its turn there is subject to the following attack
Immediate Reaction **Melee** touch
Target: Triggering creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. Fortitude
Hit: You grab the target.
Sustain Move: The wall persists.

About the Author

And lo he opened the door of gilded silver,
Heart saturated by fear. Fear from the slow creak,
"Raaaaaaagnaaaaroooooook"
It moans, laboring its virgin hinges.
Taken aback by the sights,
These sights so far removed from the mortal realm,
But so unmistakably real and human.
He steps into the world of writing for Wizards;
A world in which he longs to remain.

Class Acts: Rogues

The Fraternal Order of the Inner Vault

By Derek Guder

Illustration by Slawomir Maniak

Not every rogue skulks in the shadows, a dagger in one hand and a bag of ill-gotten treasure in the other, always keeping one eye out for a back to sink a blade into. Some ply their skills openly as locksmiths, trapmakers and dungeon guides who take great pride in their work and feel no need to hide their talents behind deception. Some would say the shadows might eat them alive, others that they are simply pragmatic. A few outsiders refuse to believe that the smith who crafts the lock can resist the temptation to crack it open and take what it protects for his own.

So it is with the Fraternal Order of the Inner Vault (also known simply as "the Vault"), a secular and honest guild of rogues who reject a brutal life in the shadows for one of honor and brotherhood under the light of the sun and civilization.

Born in the Forge

In centuries past, a faction of gnome worshippers of Moradin diverged from the doctrine of the central church. They decided to put some comfortable distance between themselves and the more orthodox members of the faith and to make their mark on the world to honor the Bearded Father. The gnomes emphasized Moradin's aspects as a creator of more than weapons and armor; they honored their god in the most mundane products produced by the forge. That was a minor eccentricity; what got them in trouble was their insistence that Moradin did not recognize any wealth that was not gained through labor. "The cost of gold is paid in sweat" was not a popular sentiment among the wealthy nobility or the clerics who profited from those nobles' donations.

The gnomes set out to help those they viewed as the downtrodden, those who labored to benefit people above them instead of themselves. They opened a mission in the lower neighborhoods of their city, where they taught the ways of the forge and crafting to anyone who came to learn. They promised to help everyone better themselves in their "inner forge," preaching that "with each strike of the hammer, with each new creation you forge, you forge *yourself* anew." Their students proved to be talented, and the mission became known for producing quality goods for people who needed them at very reasonable prices.

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As the mission's reputation grew, so did the ambition of its students. Three pupils renowned for their skill in crafting intricate locks and security systems—what some might term "traps"—also displayed an aptitude for navigating the dark and dangerous world below. They forged their own destiny and left their own mark on the world, and even though they did not formally embrace the faith, they took the lessons of their Moradinite teachers to heart when they formed the Fraternal Order of the Inner Vault.

The fortunes of the Vault rose even faster than the mission's had. Their skill for security work (both in the crafting of locks and traps and in knowing how to break and bypass them) quickly won them many patrons among the wealthy and powerful who had a lot to lock up and protect (and, ironically, who disapproved so strongly of the mission's philosophy). Similarly, the order's skill and taste for adventure made them indispensable specialists for those who explore deep within the earth and hunt lost and fabled treasures. They received more commissions than they could handle themselves, so they took on apprentices who were taught as if they were the Vault members' own children.

The Life of a Rogue in the Light of Day

Today, members of the Vault are still in high demand. To meet that demand, the tradition of apprenticeship continues. New members are closely tutored by Order journeymen and masters, leading to a very tight network throughout the organization. Members see themselves as more than affiliated craftsmen. They are the representatives and guardians of an honored profession, and their teaching and rituals reflect that sense of community and duty. Initiates constantly need to defend the honor of the order from accusations that its success could not have arisen from simple craftsmanship alone, that it must be a front for a nefarious thieves' guild.

In reaction, many make a point of rigorously steering clear of traditional rogue proclivities for stealth and deception. Almost all pay tithes to the Order, even going so far as openly declaring their income and finances to avoid any questions about underhanded dealings. Members take great pride in their skill and vigorously defend the Vault's honor against detractors. On many occasions, Vault members work alongside city constabularies to solve crimes that involve breaking and entering, thefts of highly-guarded valuables (especially if they were safeguarded by a member of the Vault!), and other machinations of less honest rogues and criminals in their city. Of course, such activities only exacerbate their relationship with local thieves' guilds, which already resent the Vault for its public condemnations of them.

Individual members usually run their own operations, which typically include crafting locks and traps, leading or accompanying expeditions into the Underdark, and 'testing' existing security for wealthy clients. The Vault officially tries to remain out of politics and has public rules against getting involved in or aiding illegal or ethically questionable projects. Members who stain the reputation of the Vault are dealt with severely; examples are made of those who are caught falling to the lure of easy gold.

Other than projects brought to them by their mentors and aid they are expected to provide to their brothers when asked, members are left to their own devices. Most maintain a reserved or stoic appearance but are eager for new challenges, even if that means delving miles of tunnels deep underground to face traps and dangers that have waited for a dragon's age.

The Bonds of Brotherhood

Members of the Fraternal Order of the Inner Vault treat each other like family, organized along lines of mentorship. They refer to their mentors as *dornarvar* (archaic dwarven for "loyal king") while other fellow members are *mervar* ("loyal friend"). Those labels are not taken lightly—loyalty to the Vault is driven into each apprentice during training. When everyone else in the world assumed they were mere scoundrels, the Order believed that they were something more, that they had both honor and value that their brothers would understand even when no one else did. That attitude engenders a powerful sense of belonging and fealty in recruits.

After an initial trial period to determine whether a candidate is suitable to join the Vault (a process not without some danger, usually involving at least one delve into the Underdark and an attempt to defeat a series of locks and traps set by senior members), a newly inducted member takes the position of *dormark*, or "anvil." Apprentices study for several years, then travel and ply their trade as journeymen for several years more before taking on an apprentice of their own and becoming a *telormar*, or "forge." Most settle down and establish a stable business at this stage, which is also known as a telormar within the Order. Every telormar is seen as a guildhall of the Vault, and all members are welcomed as brothers there and given hospitality and sanctuary. When traveling to a distant city, members seek out the local telormar first and introduce themselves to the dormark and telormar there.

The leadership of the Order, a council of the most venerable and respected elders, are known as *angdorvar*, or "loyal mithril." Nearly all have made a legend of their exploits in their youth and trained countless telormar.

Graduation into each rank is marked with great ceremony in the Order. A feast is thrown in the member's honor, and they are showered with gifts. They are expected to present their dornarvar. They also solemnly re-affirm their loyalty to the Fraternal Order of the Inner Vault each time in a ceremony that borrows heavily from the religious practices of the Church of Moradin. When a rogue becomes a dormark, their dornarvar presents them with their first gift: a plain iron key on a chain. When becoming a dornarvar themselves, they are presented with a stone key. Each key must be forged by the giver, according to tradition and ritual. If angdorvar are given another key by their peers upon joining that highest circle, it is done in a private ceremony and no lower-ranked member has witnessed it.

Religious Roots

Having grown in the cradle of a religious order, the Vault's culture borrows heavily from the Moradinite faith. Not everyone is devout by any means, but they all place the highest value on honor and loyalty and are driven to make a mark on the world around them. They do it not only for their own glory or that of the Vault, but often simply to prove that a rogue can rise to honorable heights.

Many do gravitate to religion for the usual reasons but also as another way to legitimize their profession in the eyes of the larger world. A rogue who has pledged himself to Moradin is a *craftsman*, not a common thief. The Bearded God is the most popular choice, but Erathis and Ioun both have a strong following within the Order. Rogues who have multiclassed or even hybrid-classed into a divine class are encountered often in the Vault. Runepriests and invokers are particularly common, as are avengers.

Even members with little or no faith in the gods are immersed in the iconography of the Order. Symbols of office, greetings, celebrations; nearly everything carries reference to Moradin's church. They often find themselves speaking like the faithful or even saying small prayers before tackling a difficult lock or descending further into the Underdark.

Rogues of all races within the Vault are often teased for 'sounding like dwarves', as much of the group's terminology is borrowed from the Moradinite church. They use many specialized sayings and terms, but members do not use a rumored secret language; that would carry too many associations with common thieves, or *thos*.

"He carved the mountains, and he watches over and under them still" is a common farewell among the Vault, just as "How is your forge, brother?" is a common greeting. They tend to avoid naming Moradin directly, however, preferring to simply refer to "Him" or any one of many titles: Bearded Father, Forge Father, Mountain Carver, Stone Locksmith. A "Father, guide my hands" or "My tools, like Yours" muttered under the breath before attempting to crack a challenging or dangerous lock or trap is a common habit among members of the Vault.

More philosophically-minded members often refer to the "inner forge" and the "inner vault." The former is both the drive to constantly better oneself and the act of doing it while the latter is the place within the heart where both honor and loyalty live, guarded and kept secure from temptation.

The Membership

The religious order that gave birth to the Fraternal Order of the Inner Vault was a splinter faction of gnome Moradinites, but the Order itself has grown far beyond that. The majority of members are gnomes, dwarves, and halflings, but all other races are represented. Half-orcs form a substantial segment of the remainder, as do humans. Elves and eladrin are rare, as are drow and tieflings; the former largely because of the Vault's culture and the latter because of the stigma for honorless duplicity that their races carry.

The majority of members are also rogues, though by no means all. Anyone trained in Thievery and Dungeoneering could, in theory, join the Vault. Artificers are relatively common, in fact. Bards, rangers, and runepriests have also found a welcoming home in the Order. Runepriests in particular fit in well with the religious culture. Most other classes (such as the monk, psion, sorcerer, warden, or wizard) are generally seen as too studious or lacking in the appropriate temperament, though almost any individual could join by demonstrating the appropriate ability and dedication.

Detractors of the Vault routinely accuse it of secretly harboring depraved warlocks and assassins, but the Order vigorously denies such allegations.

Plot Hooks

Here are some plot hooks DMs can use to keep a character's background or membership in the Fraternal Order of the Inner Vault involved in the ongoing plot of the campaign.

- The Vault has its roots in religion, but its branches have spread far since then, something that does not please some of the more devout members. They seek to return it to its pure roots of the open veneration and worship of Moradin. Right now, they're just talking, but will they be moved to act—perhaps violently? Will they seek to purge the Order of other races as well? Will the characters support or oppose this movement?
- The whims of the powers that be can be fickle and easily swayed. The local thieves' guild has found a receptive ear in a noble slighted by the Order. Perhaps his project was refused or the locks he purchased failed to protect his treasures as he had hoped. He has turned his influence against the Order, which now finds itself accused of the crimes it has worked so hard to keep itself above. How can they prove their innocence?
- With its regular forays into the Underdark to recover lost treasures, the Vault is bound to come across something highly sought after by many different groups, perhaps something better left alone. Organizations such as the Eminence of Araunt in Forgotten Realms or the Aurum in Eberron (or even simply followers of Ioun or the Raven Queen or cultists of Vecna) are very interested in what the characters have recovered or seen on their most recent trip. Will they attempt to buy it, or steal it for themselves? Or will they try to infiltrate the Order itself to keep a closer watch on future discoveries?

Powers

Palming Strike — Rogue Attack 1

You slash out with one hand while the other reaches into your pack to grab exactly what you need.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** or **Ranged** weapon
Prerequisite: You must be trained in Thievery
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.
Level 21: 2[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.
Effect: You may draw a single item from a container on your person.

Spider Dodge — Dungeoneering Utility 10

With your back against a wall, you trick your enemy into misjudging and striking the wall as you duck out of the way.

Encounter
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Trigger: An enemy hits you with a melee attack when you are adjacent blocking terrain.
Effect: You gain a bonus equal to your Dexterity modifier to all defenses against the attack.

Boons

These boons can be provided as rewards to characters that impress the leadership of the Vault or otherwise demonstrate their devotion and value to the Order.

Insight of the Vault — Level 4

The Vault teaches members to watch for even the slightest weakness in any defense and to make the best of it.

Grandmaster Training 840 gp
Property: When you score a critical hit, the attack deals additional damage equal to your Wisdom modifier.

Advanced Delver's Training — Level 7

Your extended forays into the Underdark have honed your senses and prepared you for nearly any situation.

Grandmaster Training 2,600 gp
Property: You gain a +2 bonus to Thievery checks to disable traps and a +2 bonus to Dungeoneering checks to forage or navigate underground.
Power (Encounter): Free Action. *Trigger:* You make a Thievery or Dungeoneering roll and dislike the result. *Effect:* You can re-roll a Thievery or Dungeoneering check, but you must use the result of the second roll, whether it is higher or lower.

Resolve of the Inner Vault — Level 9

Your loyalty to your comrades is indomitable.

Grandmaster Training 4,200 gp
Property: You gain a +2 bonus to saves against charm or fear effects.
Power (Daily): Immediate Interrupt. *Trigger:* You are dominated or hit by an attack that would cause you to attack an ally. *Effect:* Make a saving throw against the effect. On a failure, you don't expend the use of this power and no daily use of a magic item power occurs.

About the Author

Derek Guder lives in the Seattle area and works his days for Gen Con. He's a hater and a fighter and speaks a unique dialect of English that sounds remarkably like a string of expletives to the untrained ear.

by Bill Slavicsek

AMPERSAND

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ESSENTIALS ARE COMING!

This month, we're making my column available to everyone who wants to read it because we decided to give everyone an opportunity to hear about the exciting things coming out of Wizards over the next few months. I'm talking about the new DUNGEONS & DRAGONS *Essentials*™ products—10 products that form the foundation of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® roleplaying game moving forward. It's not only a great place to start if you're new to the game, but there's useful and compelling content in these products for the most longstanding members of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS community.

I'll also take a few moments in this column to preview our presence at Gen Con Indy, tell you some more about the upcoming *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, gush about the new *Castle Ravenloft* Boardgame, and inform you about the new line of novels set in the core DUNGEONS & DRAGONS world—the same world depicted in the *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and Essentials products.

Let's get started!

APPRECIATE YOUR DUNGEON MASTER

We've decided that July is Dungeon Master Appreciation Month. Do something nice for your DM during the month of July. After all, your D&D game just isn't the same without your DM. He or she delights and confounds your player characters on a regular basis, and we wouldn't have it any other way. So, show your DM you care, that you appreciate all the DM does for you and your gaming group. If you come up with a really cool way to show your appreciation, drop us a note and tell us all about it. I'll gather the best stories and talk about them in a future column. Hmmm ... I wonder what my gaming groups are going to do? Hint, hint. poke, poke.

GEN CON HERE WE COME!

We'll be in Indianapolis this summer for the Best Four Days in Gaming, from August 5-8. R&D staff at the show will include myself, Mike Mearls, Chris Perkins, Rich Baker, Steve Schubert, Rodney Thompson, Jeremy Crawford, Greg Bilsland, Jennifer Clarke Wilkes, Bart Carroll, and Susan Morris. We've got a full slate of interactive seminars happening over the course of the show, including the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Preview Show, Monster Building Workshop, the D&D World of the *Forgotten Realms*, Spin a Yarn with Ed Greenwood, Design and Development, Adventure Building Workshop, D&D Encounters, A Discussion with R.A. Salvatore, *Dark Sun* Returns, and GAMMA WORLD.

In addition, we're hosting a special celebrity event. Watch fan favorites New York Times Bestselling author R.A. Salvatore, *Forgotten Realms* creator Ed Greenwood, and celebrated fantasy artist and illustrator of the famed D&D "Red Box" Larry Elmore as they roll dice together in an epic adventure led by "DM to the Stars" Chris Perkins. All ticketed attendees will receive a bound copy of the adventure with a brand new cover illustration by Larry Elmore and signed by all the celebrity participants. Reserve your space now! Seats are limited to 100 attendees.

Not planning to attend the show (yet)? Enter our 2nd annual "Never Split the Party Contest" to win a trip for you and your scattered gaming group. Time is running out, so get your entries in fast!

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS NOVELS

We're getting ready to debut a new line of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS novels set in the world of the Nentir Vale and other locations detailed in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, the Essentials products, and our adventures. It starts with Part One of James Wyatt's prelude novella, *The Gates of Madness*. You can find the first part of the novella in the mass market edition of R.A. Salvatore's *The Ghost King*, on sale this month. The novella leads up to next year's worlds-spanning event, The

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Abyssal Plague. You'll see signs of the Abyssal Plague in Dungeons & Dragons, *Forgotten Realms*, and *Dark Sun* novels, game products, and even in the Dungeons & Dragons Encounters program, starting this fall and throughout 2011.

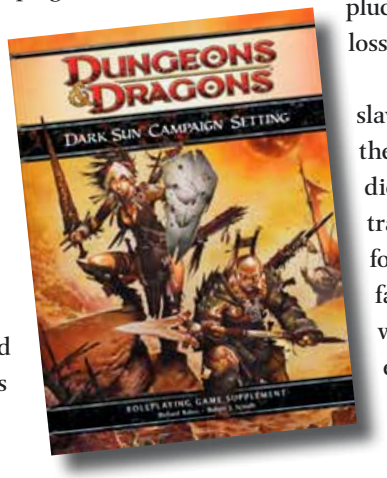
In the meantime, the Dungeons & Dragons novels kick off with *The Mark of Nerath*, written by yours truly, that introduces many of the characters that will play a part in the unfolding tale of the Abyssal Plague.

Welcome to the Castle

The *Castle Ravenloft* Boardgame arrives in August. If you're at Gen Con, we'll be playing the game throughout the weekend. This jam-packed boxed game features a ton of dungeon tiles and plastic playing pieces, loads of cards, and a series of scenarios that can be played by up to five players or with as few as one player. Each scenario takes about an hour to play, making this a fast, fun, and exciting new Dungeons & Dragons experience. Scenarios you can play right out of the box include "Escape the Tomb," "Find the Icon of Ravenloft," "Destroy the Dracolich," and "The Hunt for Strahd." Once the boardgame debuts, come back to the website to get additional scenarios to add to your game. Check out the box art and some of the game components, below.

Dark Sun Rising

The *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* returns in August, along with the *Dark Sun Creature Catalog* and the *Marauders of the Dune Sea* adventure. The *Dark Sun* world is one of savage adventure. The world of Athas has been ravaged by the wanton use of arcane magic, and it is one of the most dangerous campaign settings we've ever created. Right now, check out the Dungeons & Dragons Encounters program at a game store near you, where you can get in on some *Dark Sun* preview play. Then next month, pick up the new *Dark Sun* products. In the meantime, let's take a look at the new *Dark Sun* themes. Themes allow you to customize any character class, adding personality and flavor that further specializes the class you want to play. We'll start with the quintessential *Dark Sun* hero—the gladiator!



Gladiator

"I have no quarrel with you, friend, but circumstances make us enemies. Only one of us will leave the arena this day, and it's going to be me."

Life under the sorcerer-kings is hard. But the sorcerer-kings know that even with loyal templars and vast armies at their command, they rule with their subjects' consent. To distract the masses from their misery, to divert public attention from oppressive laws and heavy taxes, the sorcerer-kings decree the incessant spectacle of gladiatorial games.

Each city-state boasts an impressive arena, with enough seating to hold most of its citizens. Each week, or more often depending on weather or political conditions, nobles and commoners gather to watch the drama unfold, cheering madly as their favorite warriors duel with other gladiators, work in teams to claim the contest's great prize, or fight en masse to defeat whatever new horror the arena masters have plucked, no doubt at great expense and loss of life, from the desert wastes.

Naturally, most gladiators are slaves. Chosen for this fate because of their strength or skill, they live and die at the crowd's favor, pitting what training they acquire against myriad foes, never knowing when they will face an insurmountable foe, never sure when their opponent will be their equal. Arena masters understand

that their warriors fight with passion when they have something to fight for, and so they offer freedom, wealth, pleasure, or some other incentive to stoke the fires and keep their captive warriors eager for victory. Freedom is the greatest prize, of course—but the games are so violent that few gladiators live long enough to earn the victories they need to escape.

The life of a gladiator is brutish and brief, but it is the one occupation a slave can hold that also brings respect. Gladiators are heroes to the common people. Their trials and victories are the stuff of legend, and many slaves grow comfortable from the accolades their conquests bring.

Building a Gladiator

Some gladiators are born to the arena, raised from an early age to fight in front of the crowd. Others find themselves in the pit through no intention of their own—sentenced for a crime or sold into slavery, perhaps—only to discover that they were meant for the blood-soaked sands. A few individuals volunteer to fight in the arena, desperate (or cocky) enough to risk life and limb for a purse of high value.

The gladiator theme is a common choice for fighters, battleminds, and other defenders. The theme powers offer several good options for establishing control over enemies in close combat, a useful talent for any defender. In addition, any tough melee combatants—for example, barbarians or melee rangers—interested in locking down enemies in melee can benefit from these powers.

Gladiator Traits

Secondary Role: Defender
Power Source: Martial
Granted Power: You gain the *disrupting advance* power.

Gladiator Powers

The following powers are available to any character who has chosen the gladiator theme.

Disrupting Advance — **Gladiator Feature**

With an attack followed by a violent shove, your enemy flies backward. As it flails for balance, it loses its footing and stumbles into the creatures around it.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Primary ability vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + ability modifier damage, and you push the target 2 squares. The target and each enemy adjacent to the target at the end of the push are slowed until the end of your next turn.
Level 11: 3[W] + ability modifier damage.
Level 21: 4[W] + ability modifier damage.

Level 2 Utility Exploit

Go with the Flow — **Gladiator Utility 2**

You adjust to the shifting battlefield to position yourself where you can resume your bloody work.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: An enemy within 5 squares of you that you can see moves willingly.
Target: The triggering enemy
Effect: You shift half your speed and gain combat advantage against the target until the end of your next turn.

Level 3 Encounter Exploit

Savage Sweep — **Gladiator Attack 3**

You whip your weapon around you, cutting a swath of bloody carnage.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Close** burst 1
Target: Each creature you can see in burst
Attack: Primary ability vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + ability modifier damage, and the target takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of your next turn.
Level 13
Hit: As above, but 2[W] + ability modifier damage.
Level 23
Hit: As above, but 3[W] + ability modifier damage.

Level 5 Daily Exploit

Infuriating Challenge — **Gladiator Attack 5**

With one precise strike you find your foe's weak spot, both physically and mentally, and put it off guard for the rest of the battle.

Daily ✦ Martial, Reliable, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Primary ability vs. AC
Hit: 3[W] + ability modifier damage, and the target grants combat advantage to you until the end of the encounter.
Level 15
Hit: As above, but 4[W] + ability modifier damage.
Level 25
Hit: As above, but 5[W] + ability modifier damage.

Dungeons & Dragons Essentials

The action takes place mostly in your imagination, but you need a few things to play the Dungeons & Dragons game. These Essential Products form the foundation of the roleplaying game line moving forward, providing a starting point for new players and new material for longtime players. These products debut in September and roll out through October, November, and December.

Essential Products for Players and DMs

- Dungeons & Dragons *Fantasy Roleplaying Game*. This essential boxed set contains everything you need for a group of players to start playing the Dungeons & Dragons game. It contains game rules, dice, maps, tokens, and an adventure that takes characters from 1st to 2nd level.
- Dungeons & Dragons *Rules Compendium*. This comprehensive book contains the essential rules of the game collected in one place, taking a campaign from 1st to 30th level.
- Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game Dice. The Dungeons & Dragons game and other games using the D&D Game System require a special set of dice. Pick up extra sets of dice so that every player has a set.

Player Essential Products

- *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*. Create and play clerics, fighters, rogues, and wizards.
- *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*. Create and play druids, paladins, rangers, and warlocks.

These player books feature the essential elements of the game from a player's point of view. Look for more details as we roll out our previews throughout the months of July, August, and September.

Dungeon Master Essential Products

- *Dungeon Master's Kit*. This essential DM boxed set features game rules, advice, adventures, maps, tokens, and a DM Screen to help elevate the level of your ongoing campaign.
- *Monster Vault: Iconic Creatures for All Campaigns*. This essential DM boxed set features a collection of monsters for use in any Dungeons & Dragons game, from 1st level to 30th level, and includes monster tokens and an adventure.
- *Dungeon Tiles Master Sets:* Three master boxed sets of Dungeon Tiles (*The Dungeon*, *The City*, and *The Wilderness*) let you create encounter areas for any adventure. For use with Dungeons & Dragons tokens and miniatures.

I want to start off our series of Dungeons & Dragons Essentials previews with something from the new Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Roleplaying Game—the new "Red Box." First off, we've designed the outside of this starter set with nostalgia in mind. Specifically, we made it look just like the "Red Box" from the early 1980s, including using the classic cover art by Larry Elmore and the original D&D logo. Inside, however, it uses the newest version of the game. It includes a player's book, a Dungeon Master's book, dice, a battle map, and tokens representing characters and monsters. We've come up with a cool solo experience that allows each player to create his or her character while getting immersed in the story, leading in to the group adventure run by the DM. Here's a sample right out of the player's book to show you what I mean.

PART 1: GOBLIN ATTACK!

1

The wagon rattles and creaks as it rolls along the old trade road. Traevus, the dwarf merchant beside you, guides a team of mules with a steady hand, more interested in the road ahead than in your attempts at conversation, but that's part of dwarven nature. Though the sun is low in the sky, you should reach the town of Fallcrest before nightfall.

To your left, the Moon Hills stretch off southward and reach up toward the darkening sky. The fall air grows cooler with night's approach.

What awaits you in Fallcrest? Think for a moment about what your character hopes to achieve. You might imagine your character riding on the wagon, thinking about what lies ahead. Are you setting out on a life of adventure on purpose—or about to stumble into one by accident? Are you heading to the town to see someone you know, or perhaps to pay your last respects to a relative who has died? Is Fallcrest your final destination, or will you move on from there to someplace farther west—perhaps Winterhaven or some more distant settlement? Or perhaps you're looking for something and don't know where to find it, and Fallcrest just seemed like a good place to start.

Suddenly, a noise shakes you out of your reverie—the twang of a bowstring, coming from the shadows beside the road. Traevus cries out as an arrow sinks into his shoulder. With a shrill cry, a pack of goblins—short, ugly creatures with green skin and fang-filled mouths—run toward the wagon, brandishing weapons. (The illustration on page 5 shows what goblins look like.) You can see another goblin pulling an arrow from a quiver on its back. It's clear these creatures mean to steal the wagon—and that probably means eliminating both you and the merchant first!

It's time to leap into action, but that can mean different things for different kinds of fantasy heroes. How do you imagine the hero in your mind reacting to this situation?

Do you imagine pulling a weapon from the back of the wagon and leaping down to fight the goblins? Go to 2.

Do you imagine casting a magic spell to blast the goblins? Go to 3.

Do you imagine drawing a dagger, using the wagon for cover, and sneaking around to pick off the goblins without putting yourself in too much danger? Go to 4.

Do you imagine tending to the merchant's wound, perhaps uttering a divine prayer to restore his health? Go to 5.

Or do you prefer hiding in the back of the wagon until the fight is over? Go to 6.

Do you have a different idea about what to do? Go to 42.

2

Drawing a weapon and leaping into battle sounds like something a **fighter** would do. Fighter is one of the four main character classes in the Dungeons & Dragons game. Your class is the primary definition of what your character can do in the world of the game. Fighters wear heavy armor and wield swords or axes with great skill. If your character is a fighter, you might have trained as a soldier or studied with an expert duelist. You don't wield magic, but over time you'll learn to perform feats of strength and agility no ordinary mortal could accomplish. You're probably very strong and tough, and fairly quick as well.

Does this sound like what you have in mind for your character?

If it does, go to 7.

If it doesn't, go back to 1 and make a new choice.

3

Casting a magic spell to blast the goblins is what **wizards** do in the Dungeons & Dragons world. Wizard is one of the four main character classes in the Dungeons & Dragons game. Your class is the primary definition of what your character can do in the world of the game. Wizards wield powerful magic instead of weapons, and they don't wear much in the way of armor. If your character is a wizard, you probably learned magic from an older wizard, though you might have taught yourself from ancient tomes in some dusty library. You must be very smart, and you have a natural aptitude for magic. You're probably nimble and fairly wise as well.

Does this sound like what you have in mind for your character?

If it does, go to 14.

If it doesn't, go back to 1 and make a new choice.

4

You're ready to fight, but not willing to rush headlong into battle—that makes you sound like a **rogue**. Rogue is one of the four main character classes in the Dungeons & Dragons game. Your class is the primary definition of what your character can do in the world of the game. Rogues rely on skill and training, including both acrobatic feats and a certain amount of stealth, to gain the upper hand against their enemies. You probably learned to rely on yourself from an early age, maybe living on the streets and surviving by your wits and luck. You're almost certainly nimble, with quick reflexes and a fair amount of strength. You're also probably intelligent, though cunning might be a better word to describe your street-smarts.

Does this sound like what you have in mind for your character?

If it does, go to 25.

If it doesn't, go back to 1 and make a new choice.

5

The masters of the healing arts in the Dungeons & Dragons world are **clerics**. Cleric is one of the four main character classes in the Dungeons & Dragons game. Your class is the primary definition of what your character can do in the world of the game. Clerics are servants of divine powers who wield the magic of the gods to heal, inspire, and lead their allies. If your character is a cleric, you probably studied at a temple or monastery, and your training culminated in a ceremony in which divine power was bestowed upon you. You must be wise to wield such power, insightful and perceptive, as well as quite strong.

Does this sound like what you have in mind for your character?

If it does, go to 35.

If it doesn't, go back to 1 and make a new choice.

6

Hiding from danger is not the sort of thing that most characters in heroic fantasy do! The Dungeons & Dragons game is about playing a hero. Though hiding from the goblins might seem prudent, it's not the heroic course. Besides, the goblins are going to steal the wagon, so they're bound to find you sooner or later. You might as well face them now! Though the odds seem steep, these are only goblins, after all.

Go back to 1 and choose a more heroic course of action.

Next Week

That's right. I'll be back next week because there's more I want to show you and tell you about concerning the Dungeons & Dragons Essentials products and other things we've got cooking for the months ahead. Next week, Mike Mearls will also provide his own introduction to the Essential products, and I'll be back to show you something out of the *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* player's book. Until then ...

Ampersand Special: Essentials Classes

Cleric Preview

Hi. Welcome to a special free-to-all edition of my regular column. Every week throughout July and August, I'll be here to tell you about the many exciting things going on around the Dungeons & Dragons brand, including all kinds of details about the upcoming line of Essentials products. What are the Essentials products, you ask? Great question. Let me tell you all about it ...

Dungeons & Dragons Essential Products

Starting in September and rolling out until the end of the year, the Dungeons & Dragons Essentials products consist of 10 key products that form the basis of the roleplaying game system going forward. These 10 key products are designed to be a great place to start your Dungeons & Dragons game experience, as well as being a set of core reference tools for everyone playing the game.

The 10 key products include items geared specifically for players, some for Dungeon Masters, and a few for everyone participating in the game. With new formats, lower price points, and more directed products, there's never been a better time to get into the Dungeons & Dragons game.

Who are these products for?

If you're a current player of the game, these provide a more comprehensive approach to the game rules, new options, and new material to add to your existing game.

If you're new to the game, the Essentials products provide a great starting place for you to come in and experience the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game.

If you've been away from the Dungeons & Dragons game for a while, these products provide a perfect way to get back into the game. Many of the things we did with the new designs was directly inspired by the comments and suggestions of past players and Dungeon Masters.

The Essentials Player Character Classes

Now let me tell you about the heart of the Essentials—the player character classes. The player character classes presented in *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* and *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms* were designed after reviewing two years of game play. Feedback from players contributed the most in shaping the design, but we also had to keep in mind that the classes needed to be accessible to new players and players

returning to the game since the launch of the newest edition of the rules. As luck would have it, there were a number of areas where a design that could bring new players up to speed also matched the feedback for change we heard from a lot of established players.

So let's talk about what we were able to jam into these digest-sized paperback game books.

Goals

The overriding goal for the Essentials character designs was simple: Create character classes with easy-to-understand decision points. A new player might not understand the difference between an attack that dazes and one that knocks an opponent prone. It takes some experience with the game, or an appetite for a more complex or nuanced character, to make such differences appealing to beginners. On the other hand, decisions with obvious contrasts are much easier to grasp and make. Even if you have never played the Dungeons & Dragons game before, you understand the difference between fighting with a sword and shield or opting for using a two-handed axe. One provides better defense, the other better offense. A new player can draw on a basic knowledge built from watching movies, playing videogames, and reading novels to grasp that difference.

Tied to this was a secondary goal: Find ways to give the classes different levels of complexity. One of the genius strokes of the original Dungeons & Dragons game design was that it allowed players to find their own level of mastery. Playing a wizard presented different challenges and required more rules mastery than playing a fighter. We wanted to preserve and return to that aspect of the Dungeons & Dragons game in the Essentials products.

These two points also loomed large in player feedback. Some players missed the diversity of different character class structures. They felt that the current versions of the classes looked too much alike. Others liked the ability to focus on more complex or simple character classes, depending on their tastes. This was an area where the needs of beginning players and feedback from veterans neatly aligned. It was clear that we had to focus on it for the Essentials products.

Design Philosophy

There are a lot of ways to approach game design. You can create a body of rules to guide your decision and follow them to the letter. You can rely on your gut feelings and feedback rather than a specific script. We prefer something in the middle. Each project develops its own set of rules, rules that exist to keep each portion of the design in harmony with the greater whole. We've seen too many designs fall apart because they picked up contradictory goals along the way. Here's what Mike Mearls, Group Manager for the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game, has to say on this subject:

To keep a design on track, I create a list of the project's important features and goals. These features are then ranked, with most important at the top and the least important at the bottom. That ranking creates an easy guide to resolve problems that come up within the design. When there is a conflict in direction or purpose, the higher-ranking feature wins. If it seems like the lower ranking feature should win for the game to work, it moves up on the list. The rest of the design then changes to match this reordering of features. At its heart, this approach's simplicity is its strongest suit. Over the years, I've also found that it tends to take what look like complex issues and boil them down into simple conflicts between two parts of the game. For the curious, here's what the top part of the feature list for the essentials process looked like:

1. **Compatibility:** The Essentials products aren't a new version of the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game, though they do give us a chance to clean up and clarify a few things that have been causing issues the past two years. In the end, current players had to endure as few changes as possible. The only changes we embraced were ones that we would have implemented even if we were not producing the Essentials products. That's why things like the new approach to racial stat modifiers appeared in *Player's Handbook 3* and the higher monster damage appeared in *Monster Manual 3*. Regardless of the directions the Essentials products took, we wanted to implement these new approaches in the game.

2. **Player Choice:** Players had to feel they were making important, interesting choices at each step in the character creation process. From picking a class to choosing a feat, these decisions had to feel vivid and meaningful.
3. **World Flavor:** The character classes, powers, and other features had to have a place in the Dungeons & Dragons world. It is easy to divorce mechanics from any sort of grounding in the "reality" of the world. We wanted to avoid that by providing a context and logic that underscored the options we were presenting."

In the past, we focused far more on the overall structure of the character classes. Each class used the same rate of progression for powers, and class features fell away from a class after 1st level. Structure has fallen far down the list. You can expect to see different progressions in classes and the return of class features as a common element for some classes as they advance in level.

Compatibility

As you can see, we made a number of changes in our approach to class design. At the same time, we placed compatibility as our number one goal. This arrangement forced us to take a path that allowed us to add new design to the game without replacing existing classes. We decided that introducing new variations of existing character classes was the best way to meet that goal.

In the Essentials products, we're introducing new variations of the core classes in a manner similar to sub-classes from older editions of the game. The easiest way to explain the concept is to show an example.

There are two new types of fighters, the slayer and the knight, in the Essentials products. The slayer is a heavily armored defender whose two-handed weapon attacks let the class lean into the space normally occupied by the striker. The knight, on the other hand, is entirely the selfless defender who protects the weak and innocent from marauding monsters.

As fighters, the slayer and the knight can both take feats, powers, and abilities that require the fighter character class. However, they also have class features and unique powers that other fighters cannot take. The rules for sorting this out are simple. If a class gives you a power that has a level in its stat block, you can swap that power for one of the same type (at-will, encounter, daily, or utility) and the same or lower level. If the power doesn't have a level, you can't swap it for a different power.

The great thing about this approach is that it allows us to build character classes that feel unique when compared to other options. We can mold subgroups of powers to allow a new type within a class to fill a different role or embrace mechanics that highlight the unique features of a specific setting or genre.

With these rules in hand, we designed classes that fit within the story and conceptual framework of our existing classes while stretching the mechanical limits we had previously worked under. I'll be showing you examples of these classes through the summer, starting with the cleric at the end of this column.

The Future

We've charted a new direction in class design with the Essentials products. It's a direction we intend to use from here on out. It's important to remember, however, that we specifically built this to maintain compatibility with material that came before. A knight can select fighter feats and utility powers from any source, and the same is true for all of the other classes. The Essentials products allow us to roll out new approaches within the scope of the current game, not force you to buy new books and abandon your old ones.

Now, let's look at the new cleric.

The Essentials Cleric

The warpriest is a cleric that specializes in melee combat. This class uses Wisdom for all of its attacks and focuses on weapon use rather than implements. The warpriest is proficient with chainmail and light and heavy shields. Most importantly, a warpriest chooses a domain that's tied to the god that he or she follows. That domain shapes the warpriest's at-will and encounter attack powers while also providing a number of thematic class features. A warpriest can still pick and choose from the wider body of cleric powers, but the class gains a few benefits when using thematically appropriate encounter powers.

Cleric

Divine Leader: You lead by healing and shielding allies with your prayers, and by drawing on divine power to improve your allies' attacks. Your high Armor Class and effective weapon attacks let you lean toward defender as a secondary role.

Why This Is the Class for You: You like playing a character who fights in the thick of combat while wielding magic and healing allies.

The gods are a powerful force in the fantasy world of the Dungeons & Dragons game, but they do have their limits. In the earliest days of creation, during a conflict known as the Dawn War, all the gods fought the powerful beings known as the primordials for control of the world. In the aftermath of their ancient wars, the gods were prevented from directly manifesting in the world for extended periods of time. Now they war among themselves, with good deities opposing the endless schemes of their evil counterparts. In the world, they wage their struggles and spread their influence through mortal followers who draw on their divine power.

Clerics are battle leaders invested with divine power. A cleric might be a humble servant of a god or a divine enforcer, protecting what is sacred, questing for holy artifacts, and pursuing adventure in order to spread the tenets of his or her god.

The common folk look to the gods for guidance and aid, and each cleric is expected to act as a deity's emissary in the world. A cleric might lack a fighter's skill at arms or a wizard's ability to call down the deadliest spells. However, some of the greatest deeds accomplished by mortals have been inspired by a cleric's drive, vision, and ability to turn a fractious group of adventurers into heroes. The type of cleric you can create with this book is the warpriest.

Warpriest

Key Abilities: Wisdom, Constitution

Warpriests use a combination of religious dedication and keen insight to access the divine magic granted by the gods they serve. Using that magic to back up impressive martial ability, warpriests serve as the shield of their faith. Warpriests protect the innocent from marauding monsters and lead adventuring expeditions into the dark unknown. They are drawn to the borderlands between the scattered settlements of civilization and the realms of chaos. There, they attend the spiritual and military needs of the population.

Warpriests occupy the middle ground between the wizard and the fighter. They are trained to use weapons and armor, but it is their induction into the mysteries of divine magic that makes them unique. A warpriest can smash an orc with a mace one moment and unleash divine power to smite a vampire the next. The power of weapons and the might of magic meet in the divine mandate of the warpriest.

Domain and Deity

Clerics derive their power from the gods, and choosing which deity your character follows is an important first step when creating a warpriest. The deity your character follows helps to shape the powers you wield and your place in the world.

A domain is a sphere of power that specific deities control. No god is powerful enough to claim the entirety of creation. Instead, each deity watches over a specific portion of the world and the activities of its people. As warrior clerics, warpriests have an affinity for deities associated with domains that provide the power and might needed to drive back the forces of evil. Two such domains—storm and sun—are summarized below. Each domain mentions specific deities that are tied to it. Your Dungeon Master might also have other gods you can choose from that are specific to the campaign world.

Before you choose a domain, think about the kind of warpriest you want to play. Clerics of the storm domain believe in taking the fight to the enemy. They focus on destructive attacks that set up a clear path for their allies' assault. The powers offered by the storm domain leave creatures broken and vulnerable against the next attacks they face. Clerics of the sun domain use their power primarily to shield their allies from enemy attacks. Such clerics might use magic to wrap their allies in protective wards or to incapacitate their foes, leaving them unable to attack.

Class Traits

Hit Points: You start with hit points equal to 12 + your Constitution score. You gain 5 hit points each time you gain a level.

Bonus to Defenses: +1 to Fortitude, +1 to Will

Healing Surges per Day: 7 + your Constitution modifier

Armor Proficiencies: Cloth, leather, hide, chainmail; light shield, heavy shield

Weapon Proficiencies: Simple melee, simple ranged

Implement Proficiencies: Holy symbols

Class Skills: Arcana (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Heal (Wis), History (Int), Insight (Wis), Religion (Int)

WARPRIEST HEROIC TIER

Total XP	Level	Feats Known	Class Features and Powers
0	1	1	Healing word Domain features Channel divinity powers Daily power
1,000	2	+1	Utility power
2,250	3	–	Domain encounter power
3,750	4	+1	Ability score increase Holy cleansing
5,500	5	–	Domain feature Daily power
7,500	6	+1	Utility power
10,000	7	–	Domain encounter power
13,000	8	+1	Ability score increase Resurrection
16,500	9	–	Daily power
20,500	10	+1	Domain feature Utility power

Heroic Warpriest

In the heroic tier, your abilities as a warpriest focus on directing the magic offered by your domain. You learn to call down new effects as your mastery increases.

Level 1: Healing Word

Healing word allows you to invigorate and restore your allies using the power of divine magic. As you gain levels, you can restore more hit points with each use.

Healing word is a close burst, but it affects only one creature. You can use this power without provoking opportunity attacks, but remember that you must still be within range of the ally who needs healing.

Benefit: You gain the *healing word* power.

Healing Word — **Cleric Utility**

You whisper a brief prayer as divine light washes over your ally, mending wounds and soothing the spirit.

Encounter (Special) ✦ Divine, Healing
Minor Action **Close** burst 5 (10 at 11th level, 15 at 21st level)

Target: You or one ally in the burst

Effect: The target can spend a healing surge and regain 1d6 additional hit points.
Level 6: 2d6 additional hit points.
Level 11: 3d6 additional hit points.
Level 16: 4d6 additional hit points.
Level 21: 5d6 additional hit points.
Level 26: 6d6 additional hit points.

Special: You can use this power twice per encounter, but only once per round. At 16th level, you can use this power three times per encounter.

Level 1: Domain Features

When you choose a domain, you establish a path for your warpriest that grants you distinctive abilities. You are a cleric of the storm or a cleric of the sun, forever binding yourself to the faith that grants you your power.

Benefit: You gain benefits associated with your domain, which include special features plus two at-will attack powers, one utility power, and one encounter attack power. See page 109 for the storm domain benefits and page 115 for the sun domain benefits.

Level 1: Channel Divinity Powers

Once per encounter you can invoke divine power, filling yourself with the might of your patron deity.

Benefit: You gain the *smite undead* power plus a channel divinity power associated with your domain (storm, page 109, or sun, page 115). You can use only one channel divinity power per encounter.

Smite Undead

The gods created life, and most deities view undead creatures as abominations that must be destroyed. As a warpriest, you lead the fight against such creatures, scouring them with the divine energy you channel through your weapon attacks.

Smite Undead **Cleric Attack**

You scorch an undead foe with your weapon, driving it back and then binding it in place.

Encounter (Special) ✦ **Channel Divinity, Divine, Radiant, Weapon**
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One undead creature
Attack: Wisdom vs. Will
Hit: 2[W] + Wisdom modifier radiant damage, and you push the target a number of squares up to 3 + your Constitution modifier. The target is immobilized until the end of your next turn.
Level 11: 3[W] + Wisdom modifier radiant damage.
Level 21: 4[W] + Wisdom modifier radiant damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Special: You can use only one channel divinity power per encounter.

Next Week

I'll be back again next week with more news as well as more on our continuing exploration of the new Essentials player character classes—this time we'll dive into the wizard class. Until then ...

Ampersand Special: Essentials Classes

Wizard Preview

Welcome to another special, free-to-all edition of my regular column. I'll be here each week throughout July and August to bring you up to speed on the new Essentials products and to tell you about other exciting things relating to the Dungeons & Dragons® brand. Before we dive into it, I wanted to address some misconceptions we've been noticing on the boards since I started releasing information.

Not a New Edition

No matter how I write the words or how many times I say it, confusion abounds. Must just be the nature of the internet, I guess. Well, here I go again ...

The Dungeons & Dragons Essentials products are fully compatible with the rest of the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game. The rules of the game are the same as those featured in the *Player's Handbook* and *Dungeon Master's Guide*. The presentation is new, rewritten for clarity and friendliness. The format of the product is new, using boxed sets and digest-sized paperbacks instead of hardcover books. We're incorporating any rules updates that have come along since the release of the new edition in 2008.

The classes provided in the Essentials products consist of new builds of old favorites, designed to provide great starting points, more variety, and to give us more creative space for future design. The warpriest, the new cleric build that I showed off last week, for example, can use powers and feats and magic items from any product published earlier in the edition, and clerics created with the *Player's Handbook* or with *Divine Power* (also just for example) can utilize material right out of the Essentials products. This isn't all that different from us releasing *Player's Handbook 2* or *Player's Handbook 3*. We just have a more specific set of goals in mind here than simply adding more material to the game.

The spin we're putting on them is what makes these new products "Essentials." We're delegating these 10 products as "must-have" products for every retail outlet that carries the Dungeons & Dragons game. They form the foundation of the game moving forward and are designed to be the perfect way for

new people to get into the game—thanks to the format, the price, and the approach to the class builds.

To further demonstrate the interchangeability of the classes, we're going to include *Player's Handbook* classes alongside *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* classes in the special celebrity game event we're running at Gen Con this year. Chris Perkins, Dungeon Master to the Stars, will host a game for such D&D superstars as R.A. Salvatore, Ed Greenwood, Larry Elmore, and Tracy Hickman that we will record and make available for anyone who wasn't able to attend the event.

What About Products After the Essentials?

Products coming out after the Essentials, including such exciting titles as *Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow*, work with all Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game products. Just started with the Essentials? No problem! Add shadow-based powers to your storm warpriest with no fuss or bother. Got a battle cleric built with *Player's Handbook* and enhanced with *Divine Power* and a couple of feats from Essentials? No problem! It's all D&D, so it's all compatible! Everything we're producing in 2011 and beyond works with both Essentials and non-Essentials products—because they all work together! They're all Dungeons & Dragons!

Now let me show you a little bit of the new wizard build, the mage ...

The Essentials Wizard

Arcane Controller: You are a master of the mystic arts, capable of bending your enemies to your will, reshaping perception, or summoning devastating elemental power.

Why This Is the Class for You: You like the idea of commanding magical forces far beyond the capabilities of most mortals.

Wizards remind people of the mysteries of the world. Wizards are synonymous with arcane power, and as inexplicable as the magic they wield. They frighten some folk, anger others, and most just avoid them altogether. And the majority of wizards are perfectly fine with this reaction.

A wizard uses magic for offense and defense, as well as for a myriad of other tasks and applications. Wizards approach spellcasting as a science, training and studying long hours to control even the most rudimentary cantrips and spells. Few wizards can master the art of arcane magic without a mentor, and many seek entry into an arcane academy to learn the lore and traditions of spellcasting.

Wizards become adventurers to add to their knowledge of arcane lore, to discover lost techniques, and to find artifacts of great power. Some treat their adventures as a personal quest to improve the state of their art. For others, they are a higher calling, in which those wizards use the arcane power they have mastered to take on the evils that plague the world.

The type of wizard you can create with this book is the mage.

Mage

Key Abilities: Intelligence; Constitution, Wisdom, or Charisma

A mage is a specialized wizard, a spellcaster who focuses on the tenets of a particular school of magic. This specialization makes each mage distinctive. After all, a mage who casts evocation spells presents a very different picture to the world from a mage who has mastered the art of illusion or enchantment.

Mages tend to approach arcane magic with a more scholarly bent than other wizards, and that's saying a lot. Don't expect to find adventuring mages hidden away in dusty towers, however. They hit the ground running, ready to explore every dungeon and ancient ruin in search of lore and knowledge that will increase their understanding of everything arcane—and thereby increase their personal power.

The ancient traditions of the schools have been handed down since the first mortals began to dabble in arcane magic. What started as techniques and methods of training between masters and apprentices eventually became more institutionalized, and eventually actual academies of arcane study sprang up in the world and even among the eladrin of the Feywild. In time, single towers devoted to a single arcane discipline gave way to grand academies where illusion magic was taught alongside evocation magic.

Today, where and how arcane magic is taught depends on where you happen to be. On the borderlands, in places such as Fallcrest, solitary mages pass on their knowledge to one or two apprentices at a time. In larger settlements, such as the city of Nera, academies are dedicated to the training of mages in all of the schools of magic.

Creating a Mage

This section walks you through the steps of creating a mage. As you make choices at each step, consider how those choices relate to your character's personality, backstory, and goals. Consult the three class tables, one for each tier of play, for a summary of what you gain as you advance in level.

School of Magic

Mages dabble in a wide variety of arcane magic, gaining flexibility at the expense of the deeper understanding of a single type of magic that some wizards cultivate. However, every mage has a natural aptitude for certain magical forms that influence his or her mastery of arcane spellcraft.

Wizard spells are organized into schools—techniques and methods that have been developed over time to produce certain types of magical effects. The schools of magic are categories into which some wizard spells are divided.

This chapter presents three schools of magic: enchantment, evocation, and illusion. (Other schools of magic exist, but this book focuses only on these three.) As a mage, you can choose any spell from the list of wizard powers. However, you have learned a few secrets and techniques from specific schools that grant you an edge with spells of those schools.

The three schools of magic available in this book are described below. Some of your wizard class features, such as Apprentice Mage gained at 1st level, allow you to specialize in one of these schools. Read the descriptions, decide which school appeals to you, and use that to guide your choice as you create your character.

Enchantment School

First developed among the eladrin of the Feywild, spells from the enchantment school can bend a creature's mind to your will. Your enchantment spells befuddle the senses and leave a creature disoriented or open to your suggestions. Spells from this school rarely deal damage, but by allowing you to control your foes for a few precious moments, they can easily turn the tide of battle.

Evocation School

The spells of the school of evocation are a mage's most brutally effective weapons. An evocation spell channels magic to produce bolts of lightning, howling gales that can freeze enemies in their tracks, and explosive orbs of fiery energy. Evocation spells are never subtle, and they encompass some of the most potent combat powers in the game.

Illusion School

Using spells of the illusion school, you trick and control your enemies by creating apparitions and false images that confuse and control the senses. Illusion spells can leave your foes frozen in fear or lashing out at imaginary threats. Meanwhile, your allies close in for the kill.

Class Traits

Hit Points: You start with hit points equal to 10 + your Constitution score. You gain 4 hit points each time you gain a level.

Bonus to Defenses: +2 to Will

Healing Surges per Day: 6 + your Constitution modifier

Armor Proficiencies: Cloth

Weapon Proficiencies: Dagger, quarterstaff

Implement Proficiencies: Orbs, staffs, wands

Class Skills: Arcana (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Dungeoneering (Wis), History (Int), Insight (Wis), Nature (Wis), Religion (Int)

Heroic Mage

After years of toil and practice, you have finally learned enough of the matters of the arcane to head out on your own. In the heroic tier you gain power quickly, but you must still carefully shepherd your magic. One mistake can mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Level 1: Apprentice Mage

Mages are widely known as generalists among wizards, learning spells from various schools to suit their needs and whims. However, even mages understand the benefit derived from specialized study.

Benefit: Choose a school of magic. You gain the Apprentice Mage benefit associated with that school. The benefits in this book are Enchantment Apprentice, Evocation Apprentice, and Illusion Apprentice.

MAGE HEROIC TIER

Total XP	Level	Feats Known	Class Features and Powers
0	1	1	Apprentice Mage Spellbook Cantrips Magic missile At-will powers Encounter powers Daily powers
1,000	2	+1	Utility powers
2,250	3	–	Encounter powers
3,750	4	+1	Ability score increase Apprentice Mage
5,500	5	–	Expert Mage Daily powers
7,500	6	+1	Utility powers
10,000	7	–	Encounter powers
13,000	8	+1	Ability score increase Expert Mage
16,500	9	–	Daily powers
20,500	10	+1	Master Mage Utility powers

Level 1: Spellbook

A spellbook is the heart of a mage's power. Your spellbook holds the spells you know and gives you unrivaled versatility. Whenever you learn a wizard power or wizard paragon path power, it goes into your spellbook.

Benefit: At the end of each of your extended rests, you can prepare encounter attack powers, daily attack powers, and utility powers from your spellbook. These are the powers that you can use during that day, in addition to your at-will attack powers, cantrips, and nonwizard powers, such as a racial power. If you do not prepare powers from your spellbook after an extended rest (for example, if you do not have access to your spellbook), you can use the same powers you had prepared on the previous day.

Find your level on the Spells Prepared per Day table. The row corresponding to your level indicates how many encounter attack powers, daily attack powers, and utility powers you are allowed to prepare each day. You cannot prepare more than one power of any given level on the same day. For example, a 14th-level mage who has taken the enigmatic mage paragon path can prepare four encounter attack powers per day. Her spellbook contains multiple encounter attack powers at various levels. She can prepare four powers from any of the levels, as long as none of the prepared powers are of the same level.

SPELLS PREPARED PER DAY

Level	Encounter	Daily	Utility
1	1	1	—
2	1	1	1
3-4	2	1	1
5	2	2	1
6	2	2	2
7-8	3	2	2
9	3	3	2
10	3	3	3
11	3 (4)*	3	3
12-15	3 (4)*	3	3 (4)*
16-19	3 (4)*	3	4 (5)*
20-21	3 (4)*	3 (4)*	4 (5)*
22-30	3 (4)*	3 (4)*	5 (6)*

*Certain wizard paragon paths, such as the enigmatic mage, allow you to prepare one additional spell per day in certain cases.

Level 1: Magic Missile

Every mage learns this spell as part of his or her arcane studies. What magic missile lacks in strength, it compensates for with unparalleled accuracy. Neither the heaviest armor nor the toughest hide offers any defense against this spell.

Benefit: You gain the *magic missile* power.

Magic Missile — **Wizard Attack 1**

A glowing blue bolt of magical energy hurtles from your finger and unerringly strikes your target.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Evocation, Force, Implement
Standard Action **Ranged** 20
Target: One creature
Effect: 2 + Intelligence modifier force damage.
Level 11: 3 + Intelligence modifier force damage.
Level 21: 5 + Intelligence modifier force damage.
Special: If the implement used with this power has an enhancement bonus, add that bonus to the damage. In addition, you can use this power as a ranged basic attack.

Level 1: At-Will Powers

From the very first days of your training, you felt arcane power come alive within you. In combat, you protect yourself now with that power, unleashing attacks as deadly as any weapon.

Benefit: You gain two of the following powers of your choice.

Arc Lightning

Many evocation spells are too devastating to use in closequarters combat where your own allies might be struck down by your power. *Arc lightning* accurately channels that power's full destructive potential.

Arc Lightning — **Wizard Attack 1**

Lightning leaps from your outstretched hand, weaving safely through your allies to slam into your foes.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Evocation, Implement, Lightning
Standard Action **Ranged** 20
Target: One or two creatures
Attack: Intelligence vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d6 + Intelligence modifier lightning damage.
Level 21: 2d6 + Intelligence modifier lightning damage.

Beguiling Strands

Originally crafted by eladrin wizards of the Feywild, this spell creates strands of subtle magic that weave through your foes like a spider's web. Reeling from your attack, your enemies move away from you.

Beguiling Strands — **Wizard Attack 1**

A strand of scintillating colors and gleaming lights clouds your enemies' minds and forces them to move away.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Charm, Enchantment, Implement, Psychic
Standard Action **Close** blast 5
Target: Each enemy in the blast
Attack: Intelligence vs. Will
Hit: Intelligence modifier psychic damage, and you push the target up to 3 squares.
Level 21: 3 + Intelligence modifier psychic damage.

Hypnotism

Even this relatively minor enchantment underscores the power of that school, letting you direct your foe's movement or action in the thick of combat. When a more powerful monster scoffs at your so-called mind magic, see how its attitude changes when it walks off the edge of a cliff at your command.

Hypnotism — **Wizard Attack 1**

Your piercing gaze and whispered word let you seize momentary control of your enemy's mind.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Charm, Enchantment, Implement
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Attack: Intelligence vs. Will
Hit: Choose one of the following effects:
✦ The target uses a free action to make a melee basic attack against a creature of your choice, with a +4 bonus to the attack roll.
✦ You slide the target up to 3 squares.

Next Week:

More news, more previews, and a look at one of our Essentials fighter builds! Until then,

Ampersand Special: The Essential Classes

Fighter Preview

Hi. Welcome to another one of our special, free-to-all editions of my regular column. I'm talking about our Dungeons & Dragons Essentials products throughout this month and next. In case you haven't checked out any of the previous columns, allow me to recap:

- The Essentials consist of 10 key products that will form the baseline experience for the roleplaying game moving forward.
- Why are they Essentials? They contain the foundational rules of the game, the baseline character classes, races, and monsters, and the key components that you need to play. No matter what else your retailer has on the shelves, you will always be able to find the Essentials products.
- The Essentials products are designed to provide a better introductory experience to the game for new players while also containing new and exciting options for veteran players.
- The Essentials products are fully compatible with all other Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game products, from *Player's Handbook* to new products releasing in 2011 and beyond.

That's a quick recap. Now, let's look at one of the new fighter builds—the knight. Note that I'm only showing a little bit of the 1st-level knight. Check out *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* for the complete class build when it debuts in September.

The Essentials Fighter

Martial Defender: Fighters such as the knight use tactical cunning to lock down and control enemies, letting their heavy armor and abundant hit points protect them from the worst attacks.

Why This Is the Class for You: You like playing a tough character who possesses unmatched defenses and a decent amount of offense.

Fighters train long and hard to become masters of combat. When a fighter is in a party, he or she defines the front line of every battle, bashing and slicing foes into submission while blocking and parrying attacks from all directions. Fighters use their battle-honed skills to gain gold and glory, for honor and duty, and for the joy of unrestrained combat.

Through endless hours of practice and determination, a fighter develops a distinctive style of combat. This style builds atop the foundation of whatever early training the fighter received, whether formal schooling in the military arts or trial by fire on the borders of the fallen lands, and then borrows from the styles of every opponent the fighter meets.

The people of villages and towns look to fighters to protect them from the threats that surround them. Bandits, marauders, and wandering monsters of all types constantly assault the last vestiges of light and civilization in a dark world, and it often falls on fighters to lead the defense of every settlement. From there, some fighters go on to become adventurers, taking the battle into the darkness in order to strike before the next raid hits home.

Basic Attacks

As a fighter, you make most of your attacks using basic attacks. Some classes rely primarily on class-specific attack powers, whereas you typically make basic attacks enhanced by your fighter stances and other class features and powers.

Knight

Key Abilities: Strength, Constitution

Along the borderlands, knights are the stalwart commanders of peasant militias, caravan guards, and adventuring groups. Their cunning and skill puts them in control of the battlefield and lets them minimize the onslaught of their enemies. Rampaging monsters fear a knight above almost any other attacker. While the knight locks down a formidable foe, the other members of a party close in for the kill.

Many knights are members of chivalrous orders, though some are independent warriors who wander wherever their hearts take them. Each order combines a rigid sense of honor and relentless training to produce champions of the borderlands. Whenever ogres descend from the hills, when hobgoblins march from their strongholds, and when necromancers call forth armies of undead, a noble knight is the best defense an isolated community can hope for.

All sorts of warriors follow the path of the knight: young wanderers seeking to prove their mettle and gain full membership into a knightly order, reclusive warriors who abandon material comforts in favor of crusades for justice, or self-centered mercenaries who hope to claim treasure and power after every fight.

Most knights start as squires, training with orders that have heroic and historic names such as the Knights of the Watch or the Order of the Silver Dragon. Through study, martial practice, and adventuring, a squire earns the right to wear armor and bear the weapons of a knight. Orders maintain small keeps on the borderlands, from which they send out patrols, enforce the law, and repel monstrous incursions.

Class Traits

Hit Points: You start with hit points equal to 15 + your Constitution score. You gain 6 hit points each time you gain a level.

Bonus to Defenses: +2 to Fortitude

Healing Surges per Day: 9 + your Constitution modifier

Armor Proficiencies: Cloth, leather, hide, chainmail, scale, plate; light shield, heavy shield

Weapon Proficiencies: Simple melee, military melee, simple ranged, military ranged

Class Skills: Athletics (Str), Diplomacy (Cha), Endurance (Con), Heal (Wis), Intimidate (Cha)

Trained Skills: Three from the list of class skills

KNIGHT HEROIC TIER

Total XP	Level	Feats Known	Class Features and Powers
0	1	1	Defender aura Battle guardian Weapon Talent Shield Finesse Fighter stances Power strike
1,000	2	+1	Utility power
2,250	3	–	Improved power strike
3,750	4	+1	Ability score increase
			Combat Readiness
5,500	5	–	Weapon Mastery
7,500	6	+1	Utility power
10,000	7	–	Extra fighter stance Weapon Specialization
13,000	8	+1	Ability score increase Shield block
16,500	9	–	Greater Combat Readiness
20,500	10	+1	Utility power

Heroic Knight

A knight in the heroic tier is still in the process of mastering basic tactics and weapons. The talents you establish over the course of these levels are the foundation for all that comes after.

Level 1: Defender Aura

You are a knight, and the battlefield is your home. Amid the chaos and violence, you keep a cool head as you carefully measure your foes, counting on your presence and the threat of your weapon to keep their focus on you.

Benefit: You gain the *defender aura* power.

Defender Aura — **Fighter Utility**

You work to occupy nearby foes using a combination of fighting skill and clever tactics to keep them distracted.

At-Will ✦ Aura
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You activate an aura 1 that lasts until you end it as a minor action or until you fall unconscious. While in the aura, any enemy takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls when it makes an attack that does not include among its targets either you or an ally of yours who has this aura active. Marked enemies are not subject to this aura.

Level 1: Fighter Stances

Fighters learn a number of stances, special powers that combine positioning, footwork, and combat tactics to maximum effect. A stance allows you to customize your approach for fighting different enemies. Against a massive ogre, *battle wrath* allows a knight to overcome that creature's impressive hit points more quickly. Against monsters that gain advantage from flanking you, *measured cut* lets you stay in motion to keep them out of position.

Benefit: You gain two of the following powers of your choice.

Battle Wrath

Tactics and cunning have their place in every battle. However, you learned early in your training that raw anger is an effective weapon against a foe that refuses to die.

Battle Wrath — **Fighter Utility**

You channel your anger into each strike, dealing devastating damage to your foes.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the battle wrath stance. Until the stance ends, you gain a +2 power bonus to the damage rolls of basic attacks using a weapon.

Cleaving Assault

The knights who protect the borderlands stand against hordes of goblins, kobolds, and other creatures that rely on sheer numbers to overcome their victims. After countless battles fighting against overwhelming odds, you have perfected a whirling assault technique that uses the follow-through from an attack for deadly effect.

Cleaving Assault — **Fighter Utility**

Your wide, sweeping attacks carry through to let you lash out at another nearby foe.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You assume the cleaving assault stance. Until the stance ends, whenever you hit with a melee basic attack using a weapon, one enemy adjacent to you other than the target of that attack takes damage equal to your Constitution modifier.

Level 1: Power Strike

Power strike is a quintessential exploit. This power is usable with a wide range of tactics and a variety of weapons. The exploit ensures that your weapon has a devastating effect on your foe.

Benefit: You gain the *power strike* power.

Power Strike — **Fighter Attack**

By pushing yourself beyond your normal limits, you unleash your full wrath against a foe.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You hit an enemy with a melee basic attack using a weapon.
Target: The enemy you hit
Effect: The target takes 1[W] extra damage from the triggering attack.

Next Week

I'll be back again next week with more news, as well as more on our continuing exploration of the new Essentials player character classes. Next time, we'll examine the rogue. Until then ...

Ampersand Special: The Essential Classes

Rogue Preview

Hi. This is another of our special free-to-all editions of my regular column. I'm talking about our Dungeons & Dragons Essentials products throughout this month and next. In case you haven't checked out any of the previous columns, or even if you have, let me repeat myself for clarity's sake:

- ✦ The Essentials consist of 10 key products that will form the baseline experience for the roleplaying game moving forward.
- ✦ The Essentials are NOT a new game or a new edition.
- ✦ The Essentials are NOT replacing the *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, or *Monster Manual*.
- ✦ The Essentials are providing a better framework and starting point for new players while also providing new options for existing players to add to their games.
- ✦ The Essentials products work with all other Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game products, from Player's Handbook to new products releasing in 2011 and beyond—just like all other D&D products we release.

Imagine that the Dungeons & Dragons game is a highway. Prior to the Essentials products, you entered the highway at 10th Avenue. With the Essentials products, we've constructed a new entry point, and you can now zip onto the roleplaying game highway at 1st Avenue. This provides a better experience for players new to the game, as well as giving existing players new class builds and options to play with.

And the Rules Compendium, which I'll talk about in more detail in a future column, collects all of the rules of the game into an easier to use, more portable package. It's a digest-sized paperback that's lighter and contains all of the rules updates that have been implemented since 2008.

Got all that? Now, let's take a look at the new rogue build—the thief. Note that I'm only showing a little bit of the 1st-level thief. For the complete class build, check out *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* when it debuts in September.

THE ESSENTIALS ROGUE

Martial Striker: Your quick wits and mastery of stealth let you slip past your enemies to strike when they least expect it. You do your best work when teamed with a defender or another striker to flank enemies.

Why This Is the Class for You: You want to play a character who is agile, sneaky, and tricky, and who focuses on mobility and damage to a single target.

Many people have a romantic view of the rogue, seeing the members of this class as dashing scoundrels with a complete disregard for the law and essentially good hearts. Others see the rogue as a shiftless ne'er-do-well, whose selfishness and greed lead inevitably to opportunism and a life of crime. Either of these extremes might capture the essence of a rogue, but the true spirit of the class lies somewhere in between.

Rogues rely on skill, stealth, and the vulnerabilities of their opponents to get the upper hand. A rogue provides versatility and resourcefulness to any adventuring party. Whether a daring stunt or a trick up the sleeve, a rogue can usually find a way to get the team out of any tough situation. The common folk are divided on their opinion of rogue heroes. Most distrust the rogue, seeing nothing more than a glorified thug or burglar. Others see a charming hero who makes up the rules along the way. You have the opportunity to mold your own destiny, to shape opinions by the actions you perform.

In the end, that's all any rogue really wants—the ability to take every day, every dungeon, one step at a time.

The type of rogue you can create with this book is the thief.

Basic Attacks

As a rogue, you make most of your attacks using basic attacks. Some classes rely primarily on class-specific attack powers, whereas you typically make basic attacks enhanced by your rogue tricks and other class features and powers.

Thief

Key Abilities: Dexterity; Strength or Charisma

A thief specializes in agility and trickery, using hard-earned skills to pilfer and hide, escape from tight situations, and overcome deadly traps. A thief has powerful combat abilities, but relies first and foremost on circumventing an enemy's defenses through acrobatics and stealth. Brute strength and arcane power have their uses, but a thief 's quick reflexes and agile touch can get the drop on enemies before they know what hit them.

Most thief adventurers are explorers and treasure hunters, keen on delving into long-forgotten ruins in the hope of finding valuable lore, treasure, or magic. Many thieves learn their skills on the streets or as unapologetic criminals. However, such characters often develop noble intentions, choosing to steal only from the wealthy or from those in need of being taught a lesson. After all, sometimes bad guys make the best good guys.

Class Traits

Hit Points: You start with hit points equal to 12 + your Constitution score. You gain 5 hit points each time you gain a level.

Bonus to Defenses: +2 to Reflex

Healing Surges per Day: 6 + your Constitution modifier

Armor Proficiencies: Cloth, leather

Weapon Proficiencies: Dagger, hand crossbow, shortbow, short sword, sling

Class Skills: Acrobatics (Dex), Athletics (Str), Bluff (Cha), Dungeoneering (Wis), Insight (Wis), Intimidate (Cha), Perception (Wis), Stealth (Dex), Streetwise (Cha), Thievery (Dex)

Trained Skills: Stealth and Thievery, plus four more from the list of class skills

Heroic Thief

As your career begins, you work on the basic skills that allow you to evade your enemies and escape with coins, jewels, and other treasure. Although you might begin by raiding an orc lair or a baron's treasury, the abilities you hone in the heroic tier set the stage for far greater deeds.

THIEF HEROIC TIER

Total XP	Level	Feats Known	Class Features and Powers
0	1	1	Sneak Attack Backstab Weapon Finesse First Strike Rogue's Trick
1,000	2	+1	Thief Weapon Talent
			Skill Mastery
			Utility power
2,250	3	–	Improved Backstab
3,750	4	+1	Ability score increase Extra Rogue's Trick
5,500	5	–	Cunning Escape
7,500	6	+1	Utility power
10,000	7	–	Extra Rogue's Trick
13,000	8	+1	Ability score increase
16,500	9	–	Combat Readiness Improved Finesse
20,500	10	+1	Utility power

Level 1: Sneak Attack

As a rogue, you fight fair only when you have no other choice. You are at your best when you have the advantage over an enemy, such as when you and an ally attack the foe from opposite sides or you deliver a surprise assault.

Benefit: When you make an attack with a light blade, a hand crossbow, a shortbow, or a sling and hit an enemy granting combat advantage to you, that enemy takes extra damage based on your level (see the Sneak Attack table). You can deal this extra damage only once per turn.

SNEAK ATTACK

Level	Extra Damage
1-10	2d6
11-20	3d6
21-30	5d6

Level 1: Backstab

Since the day you first picked up a blade, you have understood that the best fights are those that end quickly. Sometimes you need to prevent a foe from unleashing its most powerful counterattacks. Sometimes you need to drop an enemy before it can raise an alarm or call for reinforcements. Whenever you gain the advantage, your subtle combat skill ensures that your attack hits home.

Benefit: You gain the *backstab* power.

Backstab — **Rogue Utility**

You take a split second to locate the most vulnerable point in your enemy's defenses.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Free Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You make an attack roll against an enemy within 5 squares of you using a basic attack with a weapon. The enemy must be granting combat advantage to you.
Effect: You gain a +3 power bonus to the attack roll, and the enemy takes 1d6 extra damage if the attack hits.

Level 1: Rogue's Trick

All rogues are masters of trickery. Whether by distracting an enemy with a quick flurry of a rapier, pulling off an acrobatic maneuver that allows a rogue to slip past a foe, or uttering a few honeyed words that drop a creature's defenses, all rogues rely on cunning and wits rather than brute force or heavy armor.

As a thief, you focus on staying in motion. After all, once you have grabbed a treasure, your next goal is to escape. Slaying a treasure's guards is one way to avoid capture, but it is messy, noisy, and liable to create further complications for you. You know how to move quickly to slip past an enemy.

When you must stand and fight, the same talents that make your escape possible prove just as useful. Misdirection opens gaps in an enemy's defenses, while a quick maneuver puts you in the perfect spot to find a gap in a monster's armor.

These tactics and abilities are called tricks. Tricks are powers, usually move actions, that allow you to shift or move and gain an additional benefit. Some tricks grant you a special type of move, such as the ability to run along a wall or shift past an enemy. Their benefits vary from additional damage with your next attack, the ability to knock an enemy prone, or an additional move you can use at the end of your turn to slip away from a foe's grasp. As you gain levels, you learn more tricks.

Benefit: You gain two of the following powers of your choice.

Ambush Trick

An exposed enemy is a far easier target for a sudden feint or bounding maneuver. With this trick, you move or feint with such speed and agility that you throw off its defenses. You might dash by an enemy to stab it in the back, or you feint in one direction, force your enemy to react, and fire an arrow while it is off balance.

Ambush Trick — **Rogue Utility**

You dodge and weave, making a feint that causes your foe to turn and lose track of you.

At-Will ✦ Martial
Move Action — **Personal**
Effect: You move up to your speed. Until the end of your turn, you gain combat advantage against enemies that are within 5 squares of you when you attack and that have none of their allies adjacent to them.

Feinting Trick

A feint draws its strength from misdirection. You move one way, but your enemy expects you to move another. You take advantage of this confusion by anticipating it, aiming your next attack at where your foe's back is as he turns in the wrong direction to meet your approach.

Feinting Trick — **Rogue Utility**

You slash in one direction, but quickly change the angle of your attack. While your foe reacts to your first move, your true attack slips past its defenses.

At-Will ✦ Martial
Move Action — **Personal**
Effect: You move up to your speed. You gain a power bonus to the next damage roll you make this turn with a basic attack for which you do not have combat advantage. The power bonus equals your Charisma modifier.

Tumbling Trick

Using a combination of speed and strength, you push your way through your enemies and use your momentum to make a quick, whirling attack that cuts through one enemy and into another. This attack is best used when your enemies press in on all sides.

Tumbling Trick **Rogue Utility**

You dodge between your foes, slashing to the right and left with such speed that one attack leads into another.

At-Will ✦ Martial
Move Action **Personal**

Effect: You shift up to 3 squares. The next time you hit an enemy with a melee basic attack this turn, you also deal damage equal to your Strength modifier to a different enemy, which must be adjacent to you.

Next Month

First, if you're in the neighborhood, stop by at GenCon and say hello. If you're not at the show, check back here often as we present coverage direct from the floor of the convention. And I'll be back again next month with more news, as well as more on our continuing exploration of the new Essentials player character classes. Next time, we'll examine the other fighter build, the slayer. Until then ...

Keep playing!
Bill

AGE 12+
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
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Dungeons & Dragons Essentials

By Mike Mearls
Roleplaying Game Group Manager

As we roll out the Dungeons & Dragons® Essentials line of products, plenty of people have wondered what exactly "Essentials" means. The answer is a little more complex than normal for the typical Dungeons & Dragons product. It all goes back to the initial idea behind the line.

In the Beginning

When the new edition of the Dungeons & Dragons game first debuted, our goal was to draw established players into the game. While we designed the *Player's Handbook* to be accessible to newbies, we focused on creating a game that spoke to existing players. Now that the new edition has passed its second birthday, it's time for us to focus more on new players. There are two approaches to introducing new players to the game.

First, a new player needs a book or game specifically designed to serve as an introduction. The new Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Roleplaying Game Starter Set (also called the Red Box) fills that role. It contains a solo adventure that guides a new player through the character creation process. The set also includes a sample adventure and material for a new Dungeon Master to create his or her own adventure. The Red Box focuses on the classic races (human, elf, dwarf, and halfling) and classes (cleric, fighter, rogue, and wizard). It supports characters of 1st and 2nd level, which gives enough of an experience to players to hook them without overwhelming them. Finally, it includes all the dice, maps, and tokens needed to play.

That last feature ties into the next step with the Essentials line. If you bought a new boardgame, you'd probably be surprised to find that it lacked a number of important components needed to play. It would be irritating to buy *Axis & Allies* only to find that you need to make or find your own miniature tanks and ships to go with it. You paid good money for the game, and you wanted a complete package.

The Dungeons & Dragons game has traditionally faced problems in this area. A new player buys the rulebook but then needs to figure out what to use for miniatures and a battle grid. The Essentials line aims to change that.

With the *Monster Vault* and the *Dungeon Master's Kit*, we include maps and tokens for all the monsters and adventure areas covered in them. This approach ensures that a new player has everything necessary to start a Dungeons & Dragons campaign right out of the gate. In addition, the rest of the line offers easy, obvious ways to expand the game. The Essentials *Dungeon Tiles Master Sets* are a good example of this. They come with a selection of the basic tiles needed to build the typical dungeon, wilderness, or urban encounter area. A new player doesn't need to hunt through the back catalog of Dungeon Tiles sets to find what he or she needs.

The Essentials Products

The Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game provides endless hours of fantasy and adventure. These Essential Products provide a great place to start.

Essential Products for Players and Dungeon Masters

- Dungeons & Dragons *Fantasy Roleplaying Game.* This essential boxed set contains everything you need for a group of players to start playing the Dungeons & Dragons game. It contains game rules, dice, maps, tokens, and an adventure that takes characters from 1st to 2nd level.
- Dungeons & Dragons *Rules Compendium.* This comprehensive book contains the essential rules of the game collected in one place, taking a campaign from 1st to 30th level.
- Dungeons & Dragons **Roleplaying Game Dice.** The Dungeons & Dragons game and other games using the D&D Game System require a special set of dice. Pick up extra sets of dice so that every player has a set.

Player Essential Products

- ***Heroes of the Fallen Lands: Create and Play Clerics, Fighters, Rogues, and Wizards.*** This essential player book and its companion volume feature the essential elements of the game from a player's point of view. This volume contains these classes—Cleric, Fighter, Rogue, and Wizard—and these races—dwarf, eladrin, elf, halfling, and human.
- ***Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms: Create and Play Druids, Paladins, Rangers, and Warlocks.*** This essential player book and its companion volume feature the essential elements of the game from a player's point of view. This volume contains these classes—Druid, Paladin, Ranger, and Warlock—and these races—dragonborn, drow, half-elf, half-orc, and tiefling.

Dungeon Master Essential Products

- ***Dungeon Master's Kit.*** This essential DM product features game rules, advice, adventures, maps, tokens, and a DM Screen to help elevate the level of your ongoing campaign.
- ***Monster Vault: Iconic Creatures for All Campaigns.*** This essential DM product features a collection of monsters for use in any Dungeons & Dragons game, from 1st level to 30th level, and includes monster tokens and an adventure.

Dungeon Tiles Master Sets. Three master sets of Dungeon Tiles (*The Dungeon*, *The City*, and *The Wilderness*) let you create encounter areas for any adventure. For use with Dungeons & Dragons game tokens and miniatures.

Things Get Interesting

As you can see, the Essentials products aim to bring a new player into the game as quickly as possible. However, that's only half the story. We knew we needed to create additional products for a new player to move to after the Red Box. The *Dungeon Master's Kit* and *Monster Vault* were obvious products for a new Dungeon Master, but what about a new player?

As we moved forward with 4th edition, it became increasingly clear that we could produce classes with different rates of class feature and power acquisition without harming the game. The psionics power source in *Player's Handbook* 3 pointed the way. In that book, we introduced a system by which psionic characters had access to at-will powers that they could boost using a pool of power points. By spending power points, an attack could deal more damage or gain an additional effect. After each short rest, a psionic character regains power points.

When the first psionic classes hit the pages of *Dragon* magazine, we were happy with the positive reaction to the system. Players liked that psionics felt different and offered a new type of character to play. Once we saw the reaction, it was clear that players liked having classes that were new, different, and interesting.

Essentials Classes

When we sat down to design the Essentials classes, we faced an important decision. Did we want to repackage the *Player's Handbook* material for the core classes, or did we want to try something different? After much discussion, we decided to push forward with class designs that would appeal to both new and existing players. We wanted to introduce greater differences of complexity between classes while also creating options that would interest veterans of the game.

Taking a cue from *Player's Handbook 3*, we broke down the basic math of character classes in a similar manner. This time, though, we looked at eliminating daily powers and simplifying encounter powers. That approach would allow us to create a character class that is simpler to use while still offering a compelling array of choices during play.

We decided to embrace something similar to the old sub-class concept from bygone editions. The classes presented in Essentials are different takes on existing classes, ones that share a similar place in the Dungeons & Dragons world but that use different mechanics. By embracing this approach, we could produce a "new" fighter with new mechanics without having to change the existing fighter class. After all, plenty of people already play and enjoy the current fighter. Why mess with that?

We'll go into more detail on the classes later. For now, think of the new approach as a tool that allows us to produce different progressions of powers and features within the same class.

The Most Important Thing to Remember

If you're already playing a Dungeons & Dragons game, there's one very important thing to remember—the Essentials products matter only as much as you want them to. We very carefully designed the new classes and added more options to the races in such a way that existing characters remain unchanged. Aside from the rules updates introduced over the past few months, of which the relevant pieces are included in the *Rules Compendium*, little (if anything) on your character sheet has changed. The only real changes rest in wizard encounter spells (they have miss effects now), and those changes are almost entirely additive in nature. Your *burning hands* spell is the same spell as before, except now it deals half damage on a miss.

This point bears repeating—Aside from rules updates and changes to one category of wizard spells, the character you are playing today does not change in any major way. It was crucial to us that someone playing a dwarf fighter today didn't need to rebuild that character once the Essentials products were released.

Next time, we'll examine the *Rules Compendium* in more depth. Until then, good gaming!

About the Author

Mike Mearls is the Group Manager for the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game. His recent credits include *Player's Handbook 3*, *Hammerfast*, and *Monster Manual 3*.

Canine Encounters
Part 2

BY SHELLY MAZZANOBLE
illustrations by William O'Conner

New DM has exacted the ultimate revenge!

"He's on vacation?" I whined. "He's supposed to be here helping me with my encounter!"

Technically he *did* help, as you might remember from last's month column. But that was a month ago. You can't expect me to remember everything he said about traps and tactics. I can't even find my notes.

This was bad. Very bad. But there was one thing that kept going through my head:

I am the Dungeon Master. I control the universe.

Do I really need New DM to fight all my battles? Well, it would be nice. But this was my encounter. No one, not even me, knew what was going to happen. If the monsters are supposed to get a surprise attack but I wind up attacking a huge tray of brownies instead, so be it. I am the Dungeon Master.

Maybe his ill-timed vacation is New DM's way of shoving me out of the nest and teaching me to fend for myself. I hope he doesn't try to feed me. I can chew my own brownies, New DM.

The only way to make this happen is to get the invite on the table. I sent a calendar event to the Wyld Stallyns, minus New DM, plus Chris, my Newest DM who runs us through a weekly D&D Encounters game.

"You think I'm tough as a Dungeon Master?" He asked. "Just wait until you see me as a player!"

"I ... I ... never said you were a tough DM!" I stuttered. At least not to his face. Is he reading my emails? "I like you as a Dungeon Master! Happy DM Appreciation Month, by the way. Want some ... oatmeal?" I extended a spoonful over our shared cubicle wall. "It's got raisins in it."

Thankfully I don't need (only) New DM to help prep for my adventure. Sure, I have access to an entire bank of cabinets bursting with D&D gear—minis, dungeon tiles, sourcebooks. I could probably dig up a t-shirt too if I really wanted to freak the group out. But I'd feel more honorable if I got my goods the old-fashioned way.

"Psst," I whispered, outside Chris Perkins's cubicle. "I need some minis. Help a sister out?"

"Why are you whispering?" he asked.

"I'm DMing an encounter tomorrow," I said, "and I don't want anyone to overhear who they're fighting."

Chris looked around his work area. Out of the seven cubicles within earshot, only one was occupied, and we could hear the bass line emitting from his headphones.

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"What do you need?" He sighed.

"Some minions, Earth cultists to be exact, a couple of gargoyles, and a big-ass earthquake dragon."

Chris rummaged around in his tackle boxes full of minis. They're all compartmentalized—goblins, skeletons, orcs. He tossed out a handful of minions, way more than I needed.

"I can't afford all those minions," I said. "I only need five."

"You say that now, but you'll want more," he said. "Just take them. When one goes down, add two more. They'll love that."

What's with the high-pressure minion sales pitch? Where am I, the Nordstrom shoe department? I'm pretty sure they won't love that at all, but if Chris Perkins, Dungeon Master to the Stars, says to do it, I'll consider it. My number one priority is not to overwhelm myself.

"Now, where did I put my dragons," he said, digging through a dozen more plastic containers.

Not having any luck, he reached under his desk and pulled out a giant purple tub. Not kidding. This thing was massive. Like big enough to fit a real dragon.

"What the ...?"

Inside was quite possibly every mini Wizards has created and 24 of their identical twins. This could take a while.

"Um, how about this guy?" I said pulling out the first large dragon I saw. "He looks cool."

"It's blue," Chris said, dismissing it. "I'm picturing something more earthy. Something brown or gray. Maybe green."

Again, if Chris wants me to have an earthy dragon, I'll use an earthy dragon.

In a matter of minutes I had what I needed. I guess there was some organizing method to his Tupperware madness. He even let me borrow one of his plastic toolboxes. Wow, I feel so Dungeon Mastery.

Feeling that I'd bugged him enough, I gave my thanks and went off in search of more help.

I found Mike Mearls in the kitchen.

"Just the man I was looking for," I told him.

"Really?" Mike always looks hesitant when I come around.

"Nah, but you'll do." I explained that I was DMing an encounter the following day. "And I wrote it!"

"Oh boy!"

"So, about sneak attacks?" I asked. "Do I need to make my players roll a Perception check?"

"You could," he said. "Or you could pretend the monsters were sleeping in a different room and woke up because a skirmish broke out between a band of slapdash adventurers and a gaggle of minions."

"Pretend? As in *lie*?"

"Absolutely!" Mike said.

I knew it! Oooh, Dungeon Masters!

"You're the Dungeon Master," he said, walking back to his desk. "You control the universe."

"I'm going to be a great Dungeon Master," I proclaimed, drunk with power. "I wonder how many PC's I will kill!"

"Easy, Tiger. Don't judge your greatness on how many players you kill," Mike said, getting all serious on me. "Judge it by how much fun your players are having."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I control the universe!

Later at home, I moved the dog-eared Nordstrom catalogs, *Lucky* Magazines, and Sephora shopping bags off the dining room table and laid out my dungeon tiles, difficult terrain, and traps. I visualized where the monsters would be placed. The two gargoyles and earthquake dragon would enter from the chasm. I'd allow the party to see two of the Earth cultists. I'd unleash the last three minions (or ten if you're Chris Perkins) during the second round.

I skipped *Top Chef* in favor of writing read-aloud text. I studied the *Monster Manual* before bed instead of reading a novel. In the morning, I wrote up the features of the area in place of scanning Facebook and sending emails. When I got to work I noticed an odd feeling.

"Something's different about me," I told my boss.

She spun around in her chair. "You're not wearing heels? You forgot your gym clothes? You finally stood up to your cat?"

"No." Like I'd ever stand up to Zelda. "Something ... bigger. I'm not nervous about DMing."

"Oh," she said, turning back to her computer. "That's cool."

I didn't even give the encounter much thought until it was time to head into the conference room I'd booked. I arrived a little early, set up my tiles, my DM screen, minis, rulebooks, and paper plates.

The group arrived and settled in with the usual chatter expected from people who haven't seen each other in at least two hours. But something was definitely wrong.

There was no cake. Nothing. Not even a hint of cake.

"It's Dungeon Masters' Appreciation month, you guys."

"Yeah?"

"Are you guys forgetting something?" I asked.

They looked down at their dice, their pencils, their *Player's Handbooks*.

"We forgot to wish New DM a Happy DM Appreciation Month," Marty said.

"I'll make him cookies," Laura said.

"Oh never mind," I said, trying not to let my falling sugar level flavor the game. But man, I had been talking about German chocolate all week! I guess I knew what I was having for dinner.

We began with some backstory.

When you arrive in Charlesburg, the townspeople are frantic. This once beautiful town is dotted with rubble. Beautiful stone buildings are caving onto themselves. Piles of rocks line the road. The mayor greets you. Gratitude spills from her eyes.

"Thank you. Thank you for coming. We didn't know who else to call. Dogs are disappearing!" she continues. "This is serious!"

"Of course," Marty said, rolling his eyes. "Got to save the puppies."

Marty is a cat person.

"While you're talking to the mayor," I continued, "a tremor erupts across the land. Marty falls on his face."

"It happens all the time," the mayor says. "We no longer suspect a restless Earth. We believe something much more dangerous has taken residence on the hill where our beloved animal sanctuary Howl Haven stands. What remains anyway. We have to stop this beast before our good intentions are reduced to rubble."

"In the interest of time," I continued, "we'll assume you have accepted this mission. Let's go!"

They placed their minis where I told them the entrance was and I immediately realized I hadn't figured out a good enough reason for them to go inside.

"It's raining," I said. "Really hard. Good thing the door is open!"

Once inside I placed two of the cultists on the mat about four squares from the chasm. No one's Perception check was high enough to grant any more information than the name of what they were about to fight.

"Earth cultists?" Hilary asked. "Is that like hippies?"

"Sure," I said. "They're hippies. You also hear the sounds of the Grateful Dead wafting from the other room. And the stench of patchouli makes you gag."

"If they're wearing Birkenstocks, we'll be able to outrun them," Bart noted.

Trying to shift the focus away from these perceived Earth-loving hippies, I went back to my read-aloud text.

"You notice they are carrying two large bowls. You can tell one has liquid from the way it splashes over the side. The other one looks like it may have tiny bits of food."

"Like kibble?" Laura asked.

I asked her to roll a perception check.

"24?"

"Yes, like kibble. Now please roll for initiative."

I have to say, it was weird and cool and heady to see them pick up their dice and roll just because I said to! It's almost as good a feeling as your dinner guests asking for seconds.

Four out of five party members rolled higher than my minions and got to go first. Fortunately, the first two missed. Then Bart's inebriated wizard, Merlot, busted out his new, fancy *magic missile* (you can thank your Player-in-Chief for *that* fix!) and took out one of my cultists. Stupid *magic missile*. I hadn't thought about how putting the magic back in the missile would affect my minions. Good thing I had extras.

Meanwhile, I rolled initiative for the gargoyles that hadn't made their debut yet. I inserted them in the order under the minions.

"Suddenly from the bowels of the chasm," I said, "you hear a rustling and then a piercing screech as two gargoyles bolt out from the chasm!"

"Oh I see," Hilary said, "I'm going to use everything I have because we're never coming back here."

I don't know if she was referring to the danger the party was in or that she just decided she never wanted to play in one of my encounters again. Regardless, I felt a swell of pride. My gargoyles were met with disdain. Yah! Go me!

With my two gargoyles, remaining minions, and one dragon waiting in the wings, I realized the importance of placement. I was kind of throwing minions out there willy nilly and kept forgetting the gargoyles could make better distance by air than ground. Aeon had a minion and a gargoyle marked, Anwar was bloodied, and I was overlooking opportunity attacks at every corner. Dungeon Masters have a lot to keep track of!

While Bart managed to wipe out the minions practically on his own, Aeon took out a gargoyle and nearly bloodied the other one with *flame cyclone*. There was no better time to bring out the Earthquake dragon.

"There is a massive tremor that rocks Howl Haunt. You are nearly knocked over as a huge gush of wind blows from the chasm!"

Actually, I have no idea what sounds or feelings would erupt from a chasm housing a sleeping dragon, but that's the beauty of being the DM.

The party was not happy with this new development. Their eyes got wide, they giggled, they shook

their heads in disbelief. I can only imagine what complaints I would have lobbed at New DM if this happened in our game.

Chris's character, Daylin, hit the dragon with a power that pushed it back one square. Good news for me because that triggered an action.

"Everyone in the dragon's aura is knocked prone!" I shouted. I was so excited to use this effect I forgot to act it out.

Our hour was up and I was left with a barely touched dragon, a just bloodied gargoyle, and plenty of beaten up PCs. Was it wrong to feel giddy inside every time I heard Anwar whispering his healing words?

So what did I learn about Dungeon Mastering this time around?

Be Prepared, But Not Too Prepared

I only like having parties on Saturdays so that I have all of Friday night to prepare. And by "all of Friday," I mean two weeks before the event. But no matter how much time I give myself, I always seem to light the last candle seconds before the first guest arrives. So much for the vision of me with my kitten heels propped on the freshly dusted coffee table, sipping a glass of merlot and reading *Bon Appétit* when my guests arrive.

I didn't do much to prep with this adventure outside of the hour New DM and I spent talking about it. I had most of the story in my head so I didn't even write much. Last time I spent a month sweating it and guess what? It sucked. I'm OK admitting that (now). I'm not saying don't prep. You should. But don't obsess. You may be surprised by the results.

Point Where You Want Them to Go

I used to serve a lot of dips at my parties. (And no, I'm not talking about the guests. At least not all of them.) The weird thing was, no one ate them. My beautiful beer dips and labor intensive salsas—ignored. Was it the bread? The crackers? The dish I served them in? It wasn't until I put a serving *utensil* in the dip that people started eating them. I guess a fan of Bavarian pretzels surrounding the bowl was not enough of a hint.

My trap doors went unnoticed. Maybe, given the adventure, no one wanted to walk on the fur-skin rugs that were masking them. Just like the special actions associated with some monsters, if you want the PC's to *do* something, you have to give them a reason to. I should have positioned the rugs to be between the monsters and the players. Those without a ranged weapon would almost *have* to walk on the rugs to attack. Or maybe fur rugs are just gross.

Cater to Your Audience

No one wants appletinis and cucumber sandwiches at a Super Bowl party, and my health conscious friends would be very disappointed to find a big bowl of white pasta swimming in three-cheese sauce. Knowing the environment and the people you are serving is half the battle. Even those who didn't play in my last adventure knew this one would probably have something to do with animals.

"I'd be disappointed if it didn't," Kierin said after.

The fact they have eight dogs and cats between them between them helps too.

Timing is Everything (Or Don't Forget the Brownies!)

I remember having dinner at a friend's house where everything we ate was bought at a take-out pasta joint. That's cool. I'm all for shortcuts. But maybe while there, they could have thought about picking up some tiramisu. After dinner, we sat around for 15 minutes before the host asked if we would like some brownies and ice cream. Of course we did! At that point she retired to the kitchen, where I spied her reading the back of a brownie mix box while her oven preheated. Again, I have no problem with brownies out of a box but umm ... maybe you could have made them *before* we came over?

A good menu does not just consist of food that works together. It's also about timing. Should I have brought out the bonus minions Perkins supplied me with? Did the gargoyles enter the fray at the most opportune time? When do you spring a dragon on the party? I don't know yet, but I will with practice.

I'm going to schedule a Part Two to my encounter. I can't leave a dragon with 176 hit points hanging. But first, I need to work on my audition tape to be the Next Food Network Star. I think we're on to something here.

About the Author

Shelly Mazzanoble has mastered this whole Dungeon Mastering thing. Now can anyone tell her how to stand up to her cat?

Design & Development: Demonomicon

By Mike Mearls

Demons have been a part of the Dungeons & Dragons® game since almost the beginning. I say almost because they don't appear in the monster lists of the original D&D brown box set (though robots and androids do make an appearance!) or its first two supplements, *Greyhawk* and *Blackmoor*. It wasn't until *Eldritch Wizardry* that demons first reared their loathsome heads.

While demons aren't the oldest monsters in D&D, they are some of its most popular. After all, we're not about to create an entire book about owlbears or shriekers. Aside from dragons, more has probably been written about demons than any other Dungeons & Dragons monster. For that reason, approaching the design of *Demonomicon* required a careful mix of research, invention, and planning. For this book to work, it had to incorporate classic Dungeons & Dragons lore in a cohesive way that made the book an easy-to-use reference and adventure generator for DMs.

Opening Thoughts

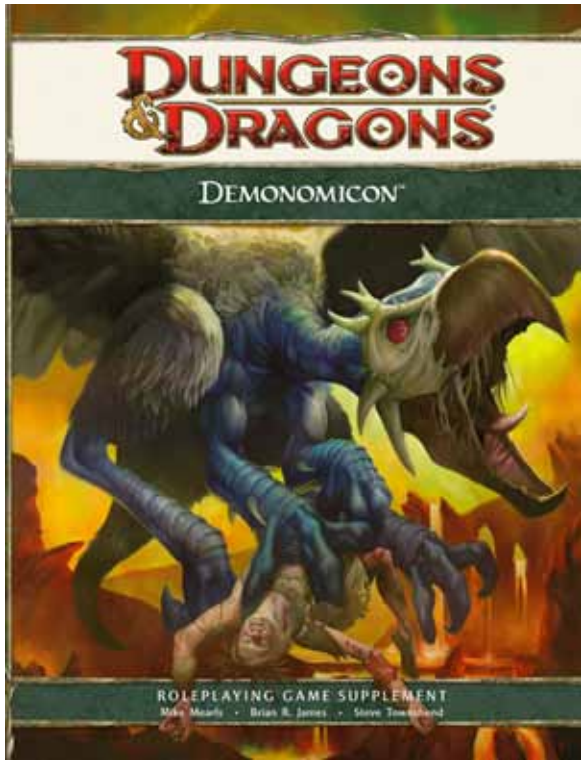
Here's an email excerpt from early on in the process of creating *Demonomicon*. It touches on a lot of the basic thoughts that drove this book:

There are some fundamental contradictions in how D&D has handled demons since the earliest days:

- Demons are creatures of chaos and evil.
- Demons are destructive and vicious.
- The Abyss is a place of chaos and evil.
- Demons neatly align themselves into hierarchies.
- Demons have lords that they must obey.
- The Abyss is cut up into fiefdoms, each controlled by a demon lord.

On the face of it, those points veer from chaos and fury to a neatly controlled, hierarchical set of realms. I think we can mix things up, but we need to resolve that basic tension. I have some thoughts on that:

Demons want power. They want to become stronger, tougher, and better skilled in magic, because for all their strength, demons are weak. Demons are shells of chaos and fury, but they lack souls. They want souls, because a powerful soul can bind and compel a demon. Demons hate that.



What's the best way for a demon to get power? Bind and control other demons. Win worshippers among mortals (essentially a form of control). A demon that achieves this task gains a true name, and a demon with a true name has a soul.

Now, plenty of demons give themselves names, but until they are powerful enough their names have no meaning. Unfortunately for a demon, a true name comes with a price. If someone knows a demon's true name, they can use it to compel that demon back into obedience.

Some demons go the possession route, seizing a mortal's body and trying to seize its soul. These

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demons are rarely successful, since in a human body they are vulnerable. Most people just kill the possessed person and bury him, but a demon that can hold on to a body and gain worshippers/power with it can find a short cut to power.

Luckily for mortals, a demon in a physical body, especially in its early stages, is vulnerable. If the body dies, the demon is utterly destroyed. Most demons aren't clever enough, or willing to become that vulnerable, to take that risk.

Now, turning my attention to the Abyss, most of that place is a dangerous, malevolent wilderness. There are some points of light, in the sense that a demon lord controls parts of it. The demon lords fight each other, primarily because they believe that a demon lord who conquers all of the Abyss becomes the most powerful being in the cosmos, but also because they want to seize each other's true names. A demon lord can increase in power, but only at the expense of another demon lord.

In essence, the demonic ranking ladder gives you points for beating/binding demons at your rank or above. You get squat for demons below you.

Now, the demon lords do bind and command lesser demons, but only to pit them against their enemies. Yeenoghu doesn't get anything for forcing a vrock into his service, but he can send 1,000 of those vrocks to tear apart Baphomet's nearest outpost.

On top of that, demons hate devils. The Blood War has been around for ages, because devils are worried that a demon might actually take over the Abyss. So, the devils do what they can to keep the demon lords weak. In addition, demon lords can also increase in power by battling gods and similar creatures. Devils are the easiest targets for them, since there are places where the Abyss and Hell are connected via gates.

Despite all the demon lords running around and forcing demons into service, the vast majority of the Abyss is a dangerous wilderness. Entire Astral Domains have fallen into it in the past, and the corpses of mammoth primordials writhe and decay in its deepest hollows. It is a graveyard of the eons, a place where the detritus of centuries has built up. Basically, it's a big mega-dungeon of sorts for characters to venture into.

Most demons might cow a few of their kind to serve them, or use petty tricks and magic to spark a tiny cult among mortals, but even more are strange, wild beasts, the equivalent of marauding animals that rampage and battle each other for food and sport. It's like the Mesozoic down there.

Demonic Power

The rivalries between demons are one of the many things that make them interesting, compelling villains. The idea of the demons fighting for dominance and rule over the entire Abyss both generates ideas for adventures and helps transform a monolithic threat into a cast of powerful villains, each with its own goals.

Building on the idea of demons as engines of raw destruction, we cast demons as hungry not only for fresh meat and destruction but for power and dominion over the Abyss. Why do demon lords fight each other? Because in the end, only one demon can rule. A demon that gathers enough strength to command the power of the Abyss itself could wield the might needed to destroy the entire universe. That's why the

demons don't just burst out of the Abyss like a horde of locusts. They'll do that only after a demon lord conquers the entire Abyss.

In many ways, the Abyss itself drives demons forward. It whispers in their minds, pushing them to ever greater acts of wanton destruction. It rewards their victories with greater power, spawning lesser demons for them to command and new, more powerful forms for them to assume. The Abyss is a living wound in the cosmos, one that seeks to fester and grow to swallow all of creation.

While it is true that the Abyss formed when Tharizdun cast a shard of ultimate evil into the Elemental Chaos, Tharizdun himself did not create that shard. Instead, it was formed by the obyriths. Trapped within the ruins of a cosmos they had pillaged and destroyed, the obyriths created the shard of evil and planted it where they hoped a mighty being would find it. Once the shard pierced a hole in the cosmos, the obyriths were free to pass through it and lay waste to a whole new planar system.

As luck would have it, the obyriths' plan did not go as they hoped. Tharizdun battled them to a standstill, while primordials that investigated the wound became demon lords that could match them in power. Today, the obyriths lurk in secret. They plot to seize control of the Abyss, but demon lords, mortal spellcasters, and other powers all seek the same prize. The Abyss is caught in an endless war.

The intent behind this design was to create a plausible framework for demons to exist within. They crave pure destruction, but the most powerful among them seek devastation on such grand scales that demons are forced into a hierarchy of lordship. The Abyss is itself an agent of destruction, a prodding force that pushes the demons to battle endlessly for control of each other and of it. Meanwhile, the obyriths lurk in the background, plotting, planning, and waiting. While even demon lords such as Baphomet and Kostchtchie are brutes intent on pure destruction, the obyriths lurk in the background, plotting, planning, and waiting.

The Abyss

As you can see from that email, from early on we had a clear view of how we wanted to depict the Abyss. I really liked the idea of setting it up as a deadly place, the deadliest region in the cosmos. Most sane folk would avoid traveling there, but sometimes that artifact or rare object you need to complete a quest was long ago lost there.

As part of presenting the Abyss, the design team behind the book focused on its overall structure. We wanted it to have a clear framework, an entry point, methods of travel between layers, and notable stops along the way that serve as either crossroads or a place of rest (though not necessarily a safe place to rest).

Visitors to the Abyss typically arrive at the Plain of a Thousand Portals. As its name indicates, the Abyss's uppermost layer is dotted with passages to a variety of deeper layers. In addition, the Blood Rift marks the Plain like an enormous scar. Cutting deep into the heart of the Abyss, the Rift is perhaps the most common method of traveling between layers.

Nestled within the Blood Rift is Morglon-Daar, a city of demons that is the closest thing to neutral ground within the Abyss. There, explorers can find at least some hope of shelter and safety as they plot further expeditions into the Abyss's depths.

From Morglon-Daar, brave or foolish adventurers can travel down the Blood Rift in search of access to other Abyssal layers. In design, we tried to approach each layer as a grand adventure location. Ideally, you can use a layer's entry as a quick guide for building adventures and specific locations within the Abyss. The detail given in an entry focuses on creating a framework, a social and geographical guide that gives you all the basic information needed to set an adventure within it. In addition, adventure hooks and story ideas placed within the descriptions offer plenty of fodder for adventure.

In the end, the basic intent was to present the Abyss as a terrifying, dangerous place, but one that is ripe for adventure.

About the Author

Mike Mearls is the Group Manager for the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game. His recent credits include *Player's Handbook 3*, *Hammerfast*, and *Monster Manual 3*.

Returning to Athas Part 2

BY RICHARD BAKER AND RODNEY THOMPSON

Welcome back to the burning sands of Athas! The Seven Cities of the Tyr Region are home to fearless gladiators, haughty nobles, outlawed wizards, and canny dune traders; in the world of the Dark Sun® setting, heroes come in many guises. In this month's installment of "Design & Development," Rich Baker (lead designer for the new 4th Edition Dark Sun setting) and Rodney Thompson (lead developer) examine one of the key new character-building mechanics to debut in the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*: the character theme system.

What is a Theme?

Rich: Just like character race and class, theme is a basic descriptive element of your character. If class describes your character's skills and abilities, theme describes what your character does with those skills and abilities. Let's say that your character is an elf rogue. You might be a nomadic raider, an agent for a merchant house, a deadly Athasian minstrel, or a slum rebel who fights for the Veiled Alliance. All of these are great "takes" on what an elf rogue might be in the Dark Sun setting; choosing a character theme lets you pick one of those interesting stories and make it a core part of your character's identity.

Here's a list of the ten themes included in the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*.

Theme	Description
Athasian Minstrel	Entertainers, spies, and assassins
Dune Trader	Agent of the merchant houses
Elemental Priest	Worshiper of the primal elements
Gladiator	Warrior forged in the arena
Noble Adept	Noble schooled in the use of psionic power
Primal Guardian	Protector of the vestiges of nature
Templar	Agents of the Sorcerer Kings
Veiled Alliance	Secret practitioners of magic
Wasteland Nomad	Raider or scout of the desert
Wilder	Heroes gifted with psionic talent

Conceptually, themes are a lot like the character kits of 2nd Edition. Back in 2e, a number of kits such as "pirate" actually appeared in the Complete Handbooks of multiple classes—there was a pirate kit for the fighter, a pirate kit for the rogue, and piratical kits for other classes too. In 4e, there could be one pirate "kit" (well, not in Athas), and any character who wants to establish "pirate" as a core part of his or her identity could choose it. That's what a theme is.

Rodney: We sometimes toss around the phrase "third pillar of character creation" alongside race and class. A theme is a fundamental description of your role in the world; it transcends race and class and is a reflection of upbringing and social status that, mechanically, goes well above and beyond the background system. One of the nice benefits of the theme system is that themes can be used to create interesting story hooks for any character and can help players flesh out their character histories in a new way. In fact, some of the most interesting and remarkable character hooks come out of mixing themes with classes that you might not normally associate with them. A fighter with the gladiator theme might not raise any eyebrows, but a wizard with that same theme? There's a potentially very interesting story there. A rogue that chooses the elemental priest theme has some element in that character's history that brought them to that point. Maybe the rogue was once stranded in the desert and pledged to serve anyone (or anything) that would save him, only to stumble over the next dune and find an oasis. From that moment on, the rogue pledged his service to the very elements of Athas, and in return started manifesting new powers.

Rich: One other thing that themes do is that they help create bonds between different characters in the same party. Members of the same race might stick together often in D&D, but it's rare to have overlap in classes in most adventuring parties. With themes, players have another way to link their characters while still remaining unique; you might be an elf rogue and I might be a human wizard, but if we both have the Veiled Alliance theme, then we automatically have a good story hook that makes us want to work together despite being from disparate backgrounds. Likewise, in the rare cases where two

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players do choose to play members of the same class, choosing different themes allows for a greater degree of differentiation. As we will show later, the option of going further into your theme lets you draw a greater distinction between others of your same class.

Why Themes?

Rich: We began the *Dark Sun* design process with a fairly conservative approach, planning to tackle classic Athasian character concepts such as gladiators, templars, or elemental priests as new classes, builds, or backgrounds—all things that we'd done before. The gladiator, however, turned out to be a real sticking point for us. Half the team felt that we should just do the gladiator as a new martial controller class, and the other half was in favor of making the gladiator into a fighter build. Ultimately we decided (after no small amount of debate) that lots of different characters might wind up in the arenas of Athas, and any of those unfortunate (or bloodthirsty) heroes would probably describe himself or herself as a gladiator. After all, a barbarian or battlemind would make just as good a gladiator as a fighter or a class dedicated to that job. For that matter, a two-weapon ranger, a warlord, or a brutal rogue would be a good fit in the arena. We realized that "gladiator" was something that needed to exist outside of class so that many different characters could take on some gladiator flavor and abilities.

Rodney: One of the things that classic *Dark Sun* did so well was to stand expectations on their heads. Some classes weren't what you expected; bards on Athas were poisoners and assassins, masters of political intrigue, and pretty far from the view of bards that was in core D&D. With the 4th Edition iteration of *Dark Sun*, we had many, many more classes in play than were present in 2nd Edition, and we kept coming up with lots of options for where to slot in those archetypes. The 4th Edition bard is now an arcane spellcaster, so does the "Athasian bard" fit as a bard build? What about as a rogue build, where its abilities are more natural? In the end, we realized that it could, and should, be both. *Dark Sun* has certain archetypes that players want to play, and what we needed was a way to make sure that players could play those archetypes without our existing class structure causing hiccups.

Rich: Once we understood the nature of the challenge, we took a long look at the kinds of characters that should populate Athas: gladiators (of course), templars, feral desert marauders, poison-wielding bards, Veiled Alliance wizards, elemental clerics, and all the rest. The list we created evolved into the themes that appear in the *Dark Sun Campaign Guide*.

Rodney: It's also worth noting that some of the concepts that make their way into themes are also supported in other ways. For example, we have a Sorcerer-King Pact for the warlock, as well as a templar them. Taking either one can make you a templar, so themes don't hold exclusive rights to character concepts. They add another angle at which to approach those character concepts, for certain, which gives players a bit more flexibility in choosing how exactly they want to represent their character's story mechanically.

How Do Themes Work?

Rich: A theme is purely additive—you don't pay anything to select one for your character, other than the opportunity cost of not choosing a different theme. When you pick your theme, you gain an additional 1st-level encounter power. It's just a bonus: A character with a theme has one more power than a character without a theme.

Rodney: The addition of the power at 1st level accomplishes a lot of positive things. First, it serves as a constant reminder that you have that theme. Just as racial encounter power consistently reminds you that you are an elf, a dwarf, etc., a theme power provides a constant reminder of your character's story and history. Similarly, the addition of the encounter power gives you a bit more variety at 1st level. Having an extra encounter power is a lot like starting at 3rd level ... an element of classic *Dark Sun* that many people remember. The power level of most of the starting theme powers isn't that much higher than an at-will (some of the effects are better than things we would put on at-wills, but they don't deal the kind of damage you'd normally associate with an encounter power), but it does form the basis of unusual mechanics around which the entire theme revolves.

Rich: You also qualify for feats (and later on, paragon paths) that require the theme as a prerequisite. Themes also come with a number of theme powers at higher levels. You can choose from these theme powers in addition to your class powers when you reach a level where you select a new power. (They work a little bit like skill powers from *Player's Handbook 2* in that regard.) In other words, choose "templar," and you get the 1st-level templar power, you

qualify for templar feats and paragon paths, and you unlock templar powers, expanding the range of power choices you have available as you level up.

Rodney: We wanted to design the theme powers so that they had some underlying themes, both mechanically and in terms of flavor, so that when you use a power from your theme it really stands out as something that came from your theme. For example, the dune trader theme has a lot of 'bargaining' in the powers; a power might give the dune trader the choice between shifting a good distance or letting a pair of nearby allies shift a shorter distance. That unifying theme helps give players the feeling at the table that their theme is giving them something unique. When a dune trader uses that power, the other players at the table should say, "Yeah, that's a dune trader power, all right." The utility powers from each theme also help to instill some of the flavor of the theme in ways not necessarily associated with combat. For example, the primal guardian has a utility power that allows him to call upon the primal spirits to lift allies up into the air, giving them the ability to fly a short distance—perfect for getting everyone over the city wall rather than going through the main gate and having to answer the templar's questions.

Rich: Theme powers are built to 'level up', so they get better if you spend a higher-level power slot on them. They're also keyed to your character's best ability score, so they're good for any character who selects the theme. Here's an example of a theme power available to templars:

Fearsome Command **Templar Attack 3**

You cause your foes to hesitate with a spell of magical terror, but your ally takes heart from your authority.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Fear, Implement, Psychic
Standard Action **Area** burst 2 within 10 squares
Target: Each creature in burst
Attack: Primary ability vs. Will
Hit: 2d6 + ability modifier psychic damage, and the target is slowed until the end of your next turn.
Effect: The next ally who hits and damages one of the targets before the end of your next turn automatically succeeds on any one saving throw at the end of his or her turn.
Level 13
Hit: As above, but 3d6 + ability modifier psychic damage.
Level 23
Hit: As above, but 5d6 + ability modifier psychic damage.

Rodney: Notice how the power allows the templar to provide an incentive for the next person who hits the target. This is one of the mechanical concepts present throughout the templar. The templar provides incentives for her allies and then rewards the first one to succeed. This reflects the templar's ability to command others with the authority of the sorcerer-kings, their penchant for encouraging fierce competition between their servants, and their ability to reward those who follow the decrees of the sorcerer-kings. That's the kind of flavor that went into figuring out what the mechanical concepts were going to be in each theme.

Rich: You'll also note that themes lean toward secondary roles. The templar theme leans toward leader (with a hint of controller) because templars are mostly about bossing around the rank-and-file of the sorcerer-king's minions and wielding the king's magic.

About the Authors

Richard Baker is an award-winning game designer who has written numerous D&D adventures and sourcebooks, including the *Manual of the Planes*, *Draconomicon 2*, and the *Dark Sun Campaign Guide*. He's also a New York Times bestselling author best-selling author of *Forgotten Realms* novels such as *Condemnation*, the *Last Mythal* trilogy, and the *Blades of the Moonsea* series.

Rodney Thompson is an RPG designer at Wizards of the Coast. Originally from Chattanooga, TN, his credits for Dungeons & Dragons include *Monster Manual 3*, the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*, and *Monster Vault*.